

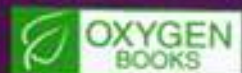


The toymakers of India are representative of the vast numbers of our urban poor. Yet they embody great qualities of resilience, resourcefulness and creativity. In independent India, the toymaker has asserted himself as part of the urban self-employed and not as part of the invisible rural masses who battle disguised unemployment.

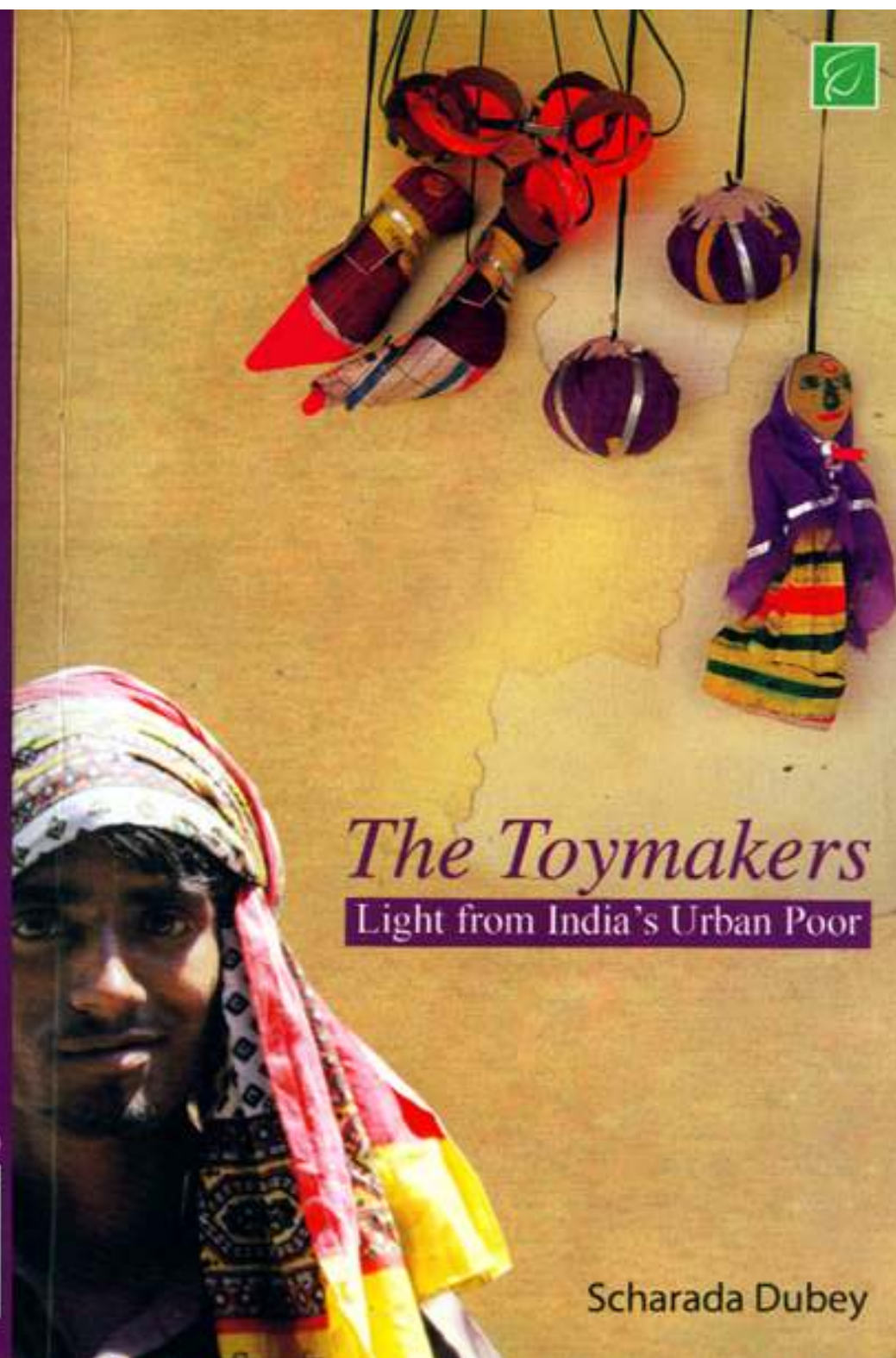
Such a self-directed existence is often admired by the poor and deprived. By the way he has chosen to live, the toymaker shows others around him how they, too, can live—if they dare.

Driven by the conviction that the individual matters, whether she or he is poor or rich, Scharada Dubey has written a riveting account of a community, transcending caste, place, gender, and time. It is the story of how micro and macro economies are intertwined and shows that a just and humane society is possible only through individual commitment.

Cover picture of toymaker Samaroooh
by Scharada Dubey
Cover design: cantocorp.com/design



Rs 120



The Toymakers

Light from India's Urban Poor

Scharada Dubey

To
The men and women whose lives are held together with paper
and string...
And the power of Nam-Myo-Ho-Renge-Kyo, making all
journeys possible, even the most difficult ones.

About the author

Scharada Dubey was born in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, and completed her education in Mumbai before moving to Chennai in 1984. She has been a college lecturer, a radio announcer, and a producer of video features for TV. She also writes content for various websites and blogs.

Scharada began to consider herself a writer while in school, after coming first in the Commonwealth essay competition in 1973. Her essay on the same theme as this book, called 'The Bits and Pieces Artists' came second in the *Outlook-Picador* Fiction Contest 2000. As Scharada Bail, she has many children's books to her credit, among them travelogues like *Footloose on the West Coast* and *Malwa On My Mind*, biographical volumes like *Icons of Social Change* and *Growing Up*, a book of life skills for adolescents. Since 2001, her weekly column of Tarot predictions has been appearing regularly in the Chennai edition of the *Economic Times*, earning her a sizeable Tarot practice and the occasional scorn of intellectuals. Scharada has a daughter and a son, and now lives and works in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, to where she relocated from Chennai at some peril to herself, her two cats and a dog.

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The Journey

As it deals with the lives of toymakers found in cities across India, this book is inevitably about journeys. But one journey that is especially important to mention here, is the arduous one to have the book come out at all. It has been over six years since I completed writing the book. It is finally being made available to the reading public, and this fact itself should bear out some of the things it is trying to say. Poverty has long become an accepted fact of life for the Indian middle class. Preoccupied with becoming global Indians and inheritors of the gleaming, shining India, many of us find it difficult to spare any time or mind space for the issues that face our poorest fellow citizens.

I am glad that the long wait did not lead to any dilution of the book's central theme or its core findings. Although publishers of different kinds wanted it to be a series of children's stories (further pushing me into the category of 'children's author' where I have long belonged!) or wondered why it was not a beautifully illustrated coffee-table book about Indian crafts, or turned it down because it was so clearly for a national rather than an international audience, I stubbornly held on with the original MS, knowing that if the book was to make the tiniest ripple in the minds of the reading public, it would have to stay true to itself.

I may have got separated from the events of this book by the passage of time, but, in a sense, I am revisiting the scenes that I have written about—this time with a plan for intervention and change. In that sense too, the publication of the book is a most welcome development. The money and goodwill earned from it will be directed to help the subjects of the book.

Since I had the original idea for the book, and through its research, writing and long wait for publication, the trust reposed in me by various individuals has been particularly important. I want to thank Anmol Vellani and the India Foundation for the Arts for providing me with the means to work on the book, and Anjum Hasan who was my guardian angel during my entire association with IFA. Thanks are also due to Prof. Ramnath Narayanswamy of the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, and Dr Sujata Ramanathan of Stella Maris College, Chennai, for letting me share the concerns of the book with their students on more than one occasion. Finally, I am deeply grateful to V Ramnarayan for taking up the book that had so daunted other publishers! And to Deepika Davidar for her sympathetic and painstaking editing. I hope all our efforts culminate in a fitting response to this work from the larger audience.

Scharada Dubey

An Urgency to Indianness

*Yeh desh mera, yeh dhara meri, gagan merá
Iske liye balidan hai, har ek kan mera...*

*(This country is mine, as is this ground, and piece of sky above it
Every atom of my being is offered as sacrifice to it...)*

Patriotic song taught to author in a government school in the
1970s

These are, undoubtedly, wounding times. For an Indian at the beginning of the third millennium, a hurt bewilderment, anger and helplessness have become familiar emotions as she goes about her daily tasks. The events of the opening decade of the 21st century have brought us vivid pictures of the differing definitions of 'Indian'. They have made it imperative for us to engage with our own 'Indianness' before it is too late, before much of what we took for granted is spirited away from us in a mysterious sleight-of-hand in which we have been co-conspirators.

We are nothing, if not a resilient society. The violence and brutality always evident in some measure at various levels in our midst have never completely taken away our perception that we are a peaceful, just, tolerant lot. We lived through the Bhagalpur blindings and the Delhi riots. We thought we had demonstrated our democratic might against Turkman Gate and forced sterilisations. Self-immolating students, the Rath Yatra that led

to the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the bomb blasts of Mumbai and subsequent cities—all these seemed to settle on the national scene like acne scars, ugly, but not life threatening. And after each eruption of violence and discontent, we waited for life to resume its even tenor once again, when we could lapse into the luxury of life in peaceful India, with a vast history of acceptance, assimilation and accommodation behind us.

Today it has become impossible to settle once more into that luxury, in case we find it gone forever. Our lives are lived amidst shrill public debate that seems to be conducted by characters who have long outgrown the finer qualities their elders and betters doubtless tried to teach them. The labels fly fast and furious. 'Pseudo-secular', 'communal', 'global citizen' are some of the most 'in' this season. If we imagined that any real attempt to understand the challenges faced by so many sections of our people could lie behind this word-mongering, we have been disabused by the display of the parliamentary debate on Gujarat. Meanwhile, there is a continued symphony of the 'external threat' being played in the background. Post 9/11 our woes with Pakistan have acquired layers of intransigence and self-righteousness, and preparedness for war seems another state that we shall have to reconcile ourselves with as a country.

The more routine aspects of our march to democratic maturity continue alongside. In Bihar, where students burnt the principal of a veterinary college who prevented them from cheating, one wonders how many people are really losing sleep over the incident, apart from the unfortunate victim's family. In Maharashtra, legislators are herded like sheep to prevent buying, selling and barter—the familiar side effects to coalition politics that we seem to have become inured to. Behind the visible, macabre theatre of our public life, issues of life-and-death importance, of development and deprivation, of the very real aspirations of millions of Indians, are being smothered by neglect, by willful misunderstanding and criminal misrepresentation. It

has never seemed more difficult to be an Indian, at least, to be one who takes pride in such a fact.

And yet, strangely, it has never been more important too. A decade and more of identity politics has brought us to the brink—face to face with the extinction of what it means to us to be Indian. If we have always taken solace from the fact that Indianness seems to survive all that arrives to confront it, then what is it that we wish to continue to survive? Is our attachment to this Indianness merely a sentimental reaction to occasions when we perceive it to be under attack? Or are we sufficiently involved to want to do something to further this attachment?

When we have rejoiced at being Indian it is often because we have perceived, beneath the seething chaos of our immediate environment, a robust, pulsating rhythm that says simply, 'Live!' Environmental chemist and musician Rahul Ram describes this, in contrast to his years in the United States, where he felt surrounded by the comforts of life, and condemned to play the '...eternal outsider, playing by their rules, wary of overstepping their written and unwritten boundaries and holding' on desperately to increasingly obsolete notions of what your original culture was all about.¹ This is, in fact, a fairly accurate description of our NRI brothers, those who arrive in our lives every once in a while, and ruffle our existence with remarks that patronise, offend, or amuse.

Returning to India meant a release from such a fate for Rahul Ram. 'Give me India any time. It's my homeland and I can live with the dirt and the sloth and the traffic jams and the corruption and the mosquitoes because they are never deterrents to happiness and peace of mind. I was so relieved to be back home in 1990 and was immediately plunged headlong and neck deep into the Narmada Bachao Andolan.' The most telling part of Ram's statement comes at the end. There is no doubt that he felt more at home on his return because he chose to plunge into work that directly dealt with the complex issues connected to our people.

He felt most Indian to be working shoulder to shoulder with other Indians—young Adivasis called Luvarya and Vaniya and Khajan.

We have arrived at a stage of our Indianness when we have to act to protect its mere existence as we know it. Invoking institutional deities like the executive, the legislature and the judiciary will just not work—unless we lay ourselves on the line. Today our defence of what it means to be Indian has to begin with our individual lives. The battle for identity has become personal.

Forging personal meaning in the current obsession with nation and identity is however much easier said than done. Confronting the nationalist demon that has been unleashed on us with such tragic effects in the last decade demands that we do away with many of the categories that we have been so comfortable with, for so long. Caste, language and dialect, region and district, class and education, all these have been the defining characteristics that we did not mind because they did not take away from our fundamental Indianness, so we thought. It has always been easy for us to wear all these as multiple layers to which we bear loyalty without upsetting the whole edifice of our belonging to India. But these categories are highly open to exploitation in the hands of leaders who live to 'divide and rule'. Over a decade after we crossed the watershed fifty years as a functioning democracy, each of these categories has sought to find expression on the national stage, with varying degrees of success. This has brought even more legitimacy to categories as such. Now, in addition to caste and class, region and religion, we have Dalit and Adivasi, Women and OBCs. Respectable categories all, and deserving of attention and concern. But can any single category, or even all of them, be said to embody that rich, composite, multi-layered, multi-hued Indianness that we wish to protect from the 'one-nation, one-people, one-culture' model being hawked by the Hindutva brigade? The answer will have to be a regretful 'no'. That indefinable something, that sense of being Indian that we know when we see it, seems to be larger than all the categories that inhabit it.

The danger is that in emphasising the immanent and indefinable nature of this peculiar sense that we share with fellow Indians, we may be falling victim to a romanticised view of ourselves that cannot bear up to the harsh test of present reality. This may bear some resemblance, as Sunil Khilnani describes it, to ideas at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the 'rich and still resonant directory of choices, a spectrum of differing ways of thinking about who we are, and of what we might hope or fear to be.'² It is clear that such ideas can hardly answer in the present, especially because, '...all these stories of India shared a romantic and expressivist view. They chose to see India's multitudinousness as an expression or emanation of some singular spirit, essence, or idea. Empirical, ever-visible differences were simply manifestations of inner, deeper commonalities, individual Indians were vehicles for an abstract Indianness. Needless to say, such romanticism was often little more than a direct and irritated riposte to the British answer to the Indian puzzle, which insisted that India possessed no internal unity, but was merely an assemblage of castes, tribes, races, religions, languages, artifacts, stories that had to be held together by an external political power. English nominalism begot Indian essentialism.'

We need a view of ourselves that does not overplay the essence at the cost of individual variation, that describes us as we live and work amidst the upheavals and changes that occur all around us. We need to see beyond categories and labels, to understand what has survived, and what lies wounded and gasping.

To me, such a view seemed impossible without meeting, understanding, loving and committing myself to what makes India—her people. And in order to surmount the categories that so plague our existence, I sought a fresh category—toymakers in an urban setting. This book is the story of what I have learnt about India and Indianness from interacting with toymakers.

Growing up in the cities of India, I was aware of vast sections of our people who seemed to form a moving, living, background to our lives. In Mumbai, or Calcutta, Hyderabad or Nagpur, there were always intensely crowded areas seething with people. As a child in the back seat of a car that cocooned one's nuclear family from the ever-shifting world around it, it was still possible to see that cities were made up less by people who had cars and houses, offices and vacations, and more by people who formed a restless crowd on the streets, or packed the public transport system. I rode to school in a Hyderabad bus with women construction workers nursing their babies in the aisle. The family that lived in the watchman's hut in our Nagpur home were Gond tribals from Madhya Pradesh. The woman who came to work for us as a maid when we first arrived in Mumbai was a Tamil speaking pavement-dweller, with children whose malnourished bellies I still remember after thirty-two years.

Should my parents have wished to protect me from the sights and sounds and presence of these fellow humans, or the distress that their predicament sometimes produced, they would have had to shelter me in a palace as fortified as the one Sleeping Beauty's father built, with no room for spindles or needles. But they did no such thing, and I continued to look ever more closely at the individuals with whom I shared urban space, even though they seemed invisible enough indeed to many of my background and education, merely a backdrop for the drive to fame and family, rewards and riches, the whole caboodle of success. Hardly remarkable, and one of the less endearing aspects of being Indian. Gunter Grass described it, on being asked what shocks him the most about India. 'The insensitivity of its middle class. Right in front of its door, there is so much poverty and misery, so much suffering, and yet, they do not react. It's as if this misery simply does not exist. But it does and the miserable are their own countrymen.'³

I saw the vast numbers of the urban poor all right. The poverty, misery, suffering and all. But by the time I had grown into

adolescence and youth I saw something else that took away some of the sting of all three—p, m, and s.

As I passed among the hordes on railway platforms, the crowds of vendors selling plastic mugs and underwear and steel bowls, as I mingled with the crowds at fairs and exhibitions of household goods and handicrafts, I would encounter single figures dispensing joy. These were the toymakers with tall bamboo poles on their shoulders from which hung all manner of toys—trumpets, windmills, rattles. Sometimes these men and women stood on street corners with a humble cloth bag slung around one shoulder, demonstrating the wonder they had created—a pair of goggles made with red plastic, through which the world could be seen in a blood-red tint, a bamboo and balloon gag that made a terrific sound when the balloon deflated, a thin broomstick on which a monkey, or bird jumped up and down.

Any one of these objects, ingeniously created out of paper and string, cardboard and colour, rubber bands and strips of film negatives, was worth far more than the Rs. 2, or 5, or 10 that you paid for it. When you held such a toy in your hands, it was obvious that such a miniature assembly of flimsy and collapsible materials actually played the vital role of sustaining the life of the creator and his or her dependents. It was also obvious that the person who had chosen to make this toy had decided to do so in spite of enormous pressure to earn his or her living by other means. The man who sold windmills on the street was also the man who made those windmills, and he was also the man who could instead have been a coolie, a construction worker, a watchman or a vegetable vendor. The fact of his selling windmills removed him from the dreary sameness of the urban human backdrop for me. I felt immeasurably cheered by the presence of these toymakers, conveying as they did that individual choice, the desire to create, and possess their own vocation surpassed the limitations imposed by extreme deprivation.

Over the years, as I reflected more and more on the toymakers I encountered on urban streets, I realised that they embodied some of the traits I most admire about being Indian. They gave full expression to the assembling, fabricating and making-do mentality that makes us such resourceful and ingenious individuals. While not being the 'essence' or 'spirit' of Indianness, this quality has been noticed and admired by virtually everybody who puts their mind to it. John Kenneth Galbraith, defending his one-time description of India as a functioning anarchy, says, '...the success of India did not depend on the government. It depended on the energy, ingenuity and other qualifications of the Indian people. And the Indian quality to put ideas into practice. I was urging an obvious point that the progress of India did not depend on the government, as important as that might be, but was enormously dependent on the initiative, individual and group—of the Indian people.'⁴

I saw that toymakers had this initiative and ingenuity. In fact, they positively brimmed with them. What made them more interesting as people I could relate to was that they militate against any of the categories I have earlier described, that overshadow every attempt we make to view ourselves. Toymakers are above caste and community—they are found across castes and do not belong only to craftsman communities. Both men and women make toys, although it is the men who are seen more as sellers on the street. Every region of India has toymakers, who are a highly itinerant lot. A Bengali toymaker will be found in Jaipur, and a Chennai toymaker will trace his ancestors to Delhi—there is no saying where they will land up with their one-stringed violin, or paper alligator. More than any of these characteristics however, there is another, fundamental reason why toymakers seemed so important for me to know and learn from. Their lives are at risk from the economic processes changing social conditions all around us. If we really want to understand how a global culture and much-vaunted liberalisation affects our people, it

makes sense to look at people who are attempting to be self-employed and self-directed in the present.

When I set out to study toymakers in February 2000, with the assistance of an enabling grant from the India Foundation for the Arts, I had only a little information about their lives. Travelling to over twenty five cities in India, and making many toymaker friends on the way, have convinced me that the toys these people make are worth preserving, the initiative they display must be suitably rewarded, and the kind of Indian they are is what I want to be, in a future rendered increasingly bleak by the posturing of different political and communal protagonists. While the story of urban toymakers was always worthy of being told, it becomes essential now as an aid to future choices we will have to make, as individuals and as a nation.

'It's not destiny or fate that has made us Indians, nor is it inevitable that we remain that way. It is a result of human choices and it will depend on human choices made now and in the future. We can choose to define India and Indianness instrumentally, as a saleable label or in terms of a militaristic state defending 'One nation, one people, one culture'. Or we might choose to see what is and can be distinctively Indian as a capacity: as an ability to improvise, a kind of cunningness at historical survival, a knack for being able to respond to any question that may be asked.'⁵ Sunil Khilnani describes thus the choices before us in the continuing concern with our identity.

The toymakers, so representative of the vast numbers of our urban poor, yet so engagingly different in temperament and character, give us a chance to gather, while we still may, those qualities of resilience, resourcefulness and creativity that make us happy to be Indian.

* * *

It is a summer evening on Elliot's Beach in Chennai, where my daughter and I sit on the concrete ledge that encloses the sand. A

Toyota Qualis parks opposite us, and two girls and a boy get out of it, with their father. Without a word being said between us, my daughter and I have both registered that this is a family arrived from America, although they look no different from us. What is it that sets them apart? We can't say.

The eyes of the children fall on our dog, Megha, sitting between the two of us. She sees them too, and rises, ears flattened and tail wagging in unmistakable welcome. They reach out and touch her silky head, notice her melting dark eyes and shiny coat, her air of ingratiating anticipation. 'What breed is your dog?' asks one to me, her simple question confirming that this is indeed an NRI family, with its mildly American inflexion.

'She's what is called Indian Domestic', I say with some pride, and a grin. 'You could say she's a magnificent mongrel,' I am unable to resist adding.

Their hands withdraw, the interest fades, they are soon specks on the horizon.

We're All In It Together

*My father came down the Sahyadris
A quilt over his shoulder
He stood at your doorstep
With nothing but his labour*

...

*It is people like me, builders of
Your grand edifice
Who add to your glory day after day, O City
We live in hell-holes and clean your streets;
Yet like stray hawkers, cops drive us out;
We move on again, settle in another vacant lot;
And live out the legacy of this putrid culture
We toil thus—so many of us
And die exhausted like a burnt-out candle.¹*

Mumbai, Narayan Surve (translated from Marathi by Mangesh Kulkarni, Jatin Wagle and Abhay Sardesai)

When you think of the state of India's cities, it amazes you to think about the quality of life that still persists. Bad roads, crippling congestion and daunting density. Civic infrastructure that is sketchy enough to spell frequent calamity. Deep pits and heaps of garbage, politicians' bungalows and acres of slums all shimmering in the sunny haze of a polluted afternoon. Yet, these

are the sites where we live and breathe, spending the finest moments of our lives, as well as the ones most filled with despair. Our cities are in our blood, each one adding spice and salt and flavour to the ordinary haemoglobin.

Hai apna Hindustan kahan? Yah basaa hamare ganvon mein (Where is our Hindustan? It lives in our villages.) wrote Mahatma Gandhi's biographer and poet Sohanlal Dwivedi in the sixties, and this may still be true, in a sense. But our cities have grown to represent the real face of modern-day India, and the developed democracy we are struggling to be. 'More than a quarter of all Indians live in cities, some 250 million people, and it is estimated that by 2010 the figure will exceed 400 million, giving India one of the largest urban populations in the world. In legend and in fact India may still be a land of villages, but no Indian can today avoid the cities,'² points out Sunil Khilnani in *The Idea of India*.

So who are the figures behind these figures? What do our cities mean to the millions who live in them? To some of us they represent havens for our genius to flourish, for us to snatch some measure of happiness from the fleeting journey called life, tempered by discomforts like the building lift frequently breaking down, traffic snarls on our way to work, or power cuts that nullify the air conditioning. To others who live right next door, they could mean all their belongings in a bundle and a trunk to be snatched and fled with every time a slum fire hits. Or daily beatings and wrangling with local policemen for practising their livelihood such as driving a cycle rickshaw, vending vegetables or cloth caps, even cutting hair or shaving customers on the side of the road. It's all happening in the city, that great canvas for every comfort and cruelty, where we are both condemned and blessed to be. It is here that we will have to make the choices which will determine what India could and should mean to her people.

A vast network of services manned by people officially working in the 'informal sector' of the economy keeps our cities humming with activity and convenient for the urbane. Every city dweller,

by his or her mere existence in the town or metro in which he or she lives, is privy to the facilities that this vast informal sector provides. It is due to the presence of such people that we can stand on our doorstep or gate and call out for vegetables, or a person to iron clothes, or a rickshaw to take an elderly relative to hospital. We are everywhere surrounded by the care-givers—those whose job it is to care for us, or so we assume, for a quarter of the price we would pay if the same service was being provided by more recognised agencies. Thus the average person would think nothing of bargaining with a roadside vendor for a leather belt, or haggling with a rickshaw man over the price of a ride. In fact, the ability to drive a hard bargain is often considered a middle-class virtue, especially in these times of inflation.

But what about the service providers? How much of our society's benefits, its much vaunted drive to development, its gleaming new conveniences, are providing any relief to the people who make lives comfortable in the city? In fact, the opposite often happens. The rising influx of people from the rural areas is wont to give city dwellers the chance to complain about how these people are stretching the limited municipal infrastructure to the limit. Many middle-class or affluent conversations could refer to such people as a nuisance comparable to a lower level of life. And many scenes in our metros, such as the crowds of beggars and urchins who descend on cars at traffic signals, would seem to bear out this fact. We cringe and complain and wish the people would just go away—anxious to preserve our sensibilities from the onslaught of pain and ugliness. In our desire for simple relief, we forget that people could hardly be placed in such situations out of their choice. There are powerful forces keeping such people where they are, and the most powerful of them all is our own indifference.

In fact, for every single individual of the 'human refuse' kind that inhabit our cities, there are at least twenty others who live in extreme poverty and deprivation, yet labour hard to provide what the city and its denizens need. These are the people who practice

every virtue we have been taught to uphold—honesty, thrift, politeness, commitment to duty—and their rewards are meager, both in cash, or in simple kindness.

On 25 June 2001, Manushi Nagrik Adhikar Manch organised a Lok Sunvayi or Public Hearing of vendors and hawkers in New Delhi. This meeting, presided over by Shri N Vittal, Central Vigilance Commissioner of India, brought many concerned face to face with the relentless brutality, extortion and blackmail that vendors have to put up with from the police as they ply their trade. The policy of issuing licenses to hawkers, in far lower numbers than their actual strength, in creating and maintaining an illegality that they can then exploit by asking for bribes, fines and compensation, was fully exposed. The complicated processes faced by vendors if their rehdis or push carts were confiscated and had to be reclaimed was described in detail by the sufferers themselves. Every person present on this occasion, from writers and journalists to lawyers and Members of Parliament felt moved to do something to remove the inherent injustice of the laws used to terrorise hawkers. But on a national scale, the atrocities continue as powerless victims practice mute acceptance, and people in power are not held accountable by those who have voice and clout.

By pushing hawkers and vendors into increasingly threatened situations in the name of urban hygiene and development, we could be indeed hurting ourselves more than we can imagine.

‘Street vending absorbs millions of those who come to cities as economic refugees from villages, because they can enter this occupation with very small amounts of capital. They not only create employment for themselves with their own entrepreneurial skills, but also help generate employment in agriculture as well as small scale industry. They are the main distribution channel for a large variety of products of daily consumption—fruit, vegetables, readymade garments, shoes, household gadgets, toys, stationery, newspapers, magazines and so on. If they were to be

eliminated from the urban markets, it would lead to a severe crisis for fruit and vegetable farmers, as well as small scale industries which cannot afford to retail their products through expensive distribution networks in the formal sector. Hawkers provide a low cost, decentralised and highly efficient system of distribution covering an incredible variety of products, at prices far lower than those prevailing in the established markets. They reach the consumer at convenient locations, even at their doorsteps.... But for their enterprise, urban consumers would have to travel long distances by buses, cars and scooters to procure their daily necessities.’³

(Blackmail, Bribes and Beatings: Lok Sunwayi of Delhi’s Street Vendors by Madhu Kishwar, Manushi No. 124)

Add to the above the invaluable services that vendors provide to the poor, by giving them nutritionally rich, fresh produce at low costs, as well as the sense of security they provide in neighbourhoods, wherever they are present in large numbers as people we can call out to, night and day. It is obvious that plotting to destroy this section of our fellow citizens is like shooting ourselves in the leg.

And yet, when the municipal administration begins to take steps against such vendors in well publicised campaigns, there is hardly a murmur of protest from the people who are their daily customers. Very few voices are raised demanding a look at the complex issues behind letting the hawkers ply their trade. Ordinary citizens remain unaware of the long and garbled licensing process under which such people are meant to operate, thus allowing the perpetuation of enforced illegality and its related evils of bribery and extortion. Why must such a poor section of our society, displaying an entrepreneurial spirit that is essential to our survival, have to struggle in this twilight of illegality? If you are a hawker, you must have a license, but getting a license is virtually impossible. Therefore, ply your trade, and pay off the policeman, even if what he demands takes care of

your profit, or the few extra drumsticks, or bananas with which you were planning to feed your own family.

Since the mid-1980s, we have had much made of our new freedom from licensing as part of the liberalisation that was to take us to great industrial heights. If licensing was reconsidered or relaxed for industry, it was because of powerful lobbies which could represent the views of industry and capital. Who will represent the interests of rickshaw men and vegetable vendors still crushed under licensing laws, in a third-millennium, liberalised India? Not much thought is wasted on the issues around street vendors' lives. Is this a general lack of thinking that we practice in every area of our lives, or if it is thinking focused elsewhere, such as sending one's children to study abroad while directing kar sevaks to Ayodhya! If we are to find any solutions to the problems faced by the 'informal sector' we will need to hold our planners and people in power very much to account.

The toymakers on the streets of the city are very much entrepreneur-vendors, just like all the other street vendors around them. They are poor and unskilled in the sense of not possessing the education and qualifications that will lift them out of the poverty trap. But they are also very different from the other vendors and poor, enterprising survivors. What distinguishes them is their exercising a creative impulse that refuses to be cowed into mere labour.

'The artisan is a person possessing the special skill for bringing an object into existence. Because he is a specialist, he is intimately acquainted with every material and process involved in the production of his object, and the interrelationships of each of these...The basis for the artisan's special skill lies in his autonomous impulse, under which he has a direct and spontaneous relationship with the materials and conditions he needs to create his product. This relationship is of a nature that enriches both...Such an artisan is his own master. He is not engaged in the process of production as anybody's slave. His art,

his ideas, his knowledge, skill, labour, his continued application, the traditions he has inherited—all these can be used without his consent only by an unjust and authoritarian society. Whenever the artisan is forced to produce his product—that is, whenever he is reduced to being an ordinary worker or labourer, his special skills will begin to lose their strength. While the bond of the artisan and his creative choice becomes weaker, unjust processes in society gather strength. There is no doubt that all processes that attack the creativity and specialised knowledge of the artisan are ultimately lethal for society itself.'⁴(Editorial Committee, Artisan Community in an extract of the Third Conference of India's Traditional Science and Technologies, Varanasi 1998.)

When a toymaker makes the decision to make toys for a living—ephemeral objects that do not have any obvious utility value, other than the providing of some delight—he is usually bringing some unacknowledged skills to the surface. A man may begin to make toys in the city, helped by skills he learnt from his rural past. Or an individual may decide to be a toymaker after observing another make his living in this way in the city itself. Either way, the toymaker artisan is not being forced by outside concerns alone in making his decision. It is a matter of inner volition, of aptitude, and skills that may not be valued elsewhere, but which bring great joy to children. By making such skills responsible for the upkeep of himself and his family, the toymaker is exercising an artisanal choice that illustrates that such a choice is still possible in the society in which he lives.

It is not for nothing that we have to be concerned if the khilonewalla's toys are disappearing from our streets. It is not as if a preoccupation with toymakers is the sign of some obscurantist clinging to the past, and lifestyles of the past. In terms which have become easier to understand, the presence of toymakers amongst us, is somewhat like the presence of tigers in a forest. By their mere presence, the tigers, those magnificent predators, indicate whether a forest is healthy enough to sustain all the forms of life that come beneath them. When we look at the jaunty

toymaker coming down our city street, the pole balanced on his shoulder festooned with paper figures whose arms and legs move up and down when a string on their backs is pulled, we have every reason to feel a thrill of pure contentment. Surely life cannot be all bad, if such a man still has space to exist.

Unfortunately, this space is undeniably, steadily shrinking. In the two years I spent looking for toymakers in the bazaars and streets of urban India, I found far fewer toymakers than I remembered from my own childhood. The most visible form of vendor selling ephemeral joys for children is now the balloonwalla, or the man selling bubble blowers or brightly coloured plastic balls. The more complex toys have disappeared, as have their cheerful, whimsical makers. And indifferent and callous as we are, we do not even mourn, carrying on in our cities.

But the part toymakers play in our lives cries out to be acknowledged, as does the contribution of all our fellow city dwellers from the 'informal sector'. In fact, this contribution is only partly made up of actual services and goods that can be quantified. The rest is the more important part—our helpers' and care-givers' abilities to lift our spirits, make us feel welcomed in our own homes. I experienced the most dramatic side of this, when I made the transition from impatient youthfulness to more understanding adulthood. I had come to Chennai from Mumbai and bitterly resented the intrusive and inquisitive natures of fellow Chennaites. Why did people have to ask so many questions, I felt. Why did Madras resemble a village, rather than a self-respecting metro?

And then I left for a ten day trip to Mumbai with my baby, and returned after the usual tearful farewell from my parents. The questions now came from my fruit man, the elderly watchman in a neighbour's house, and even from the ever-moving raddi-man asking for old papers and bottles on his cycle. 'Have you been away, Ma?' they asked. 'We haven't seen you in a while.' I smiled and made my replies in a fairly ordinary way, but inside me,

something was shifting, changing. They missed me! I was thinking. They care whether I'm here or not! I was leaving my parental home in Mumbai several years after leaving it. And it was these 'informal sector' inhabitants that showed me my new home.

The bond that binds us to these city dwellers exists, whether we choose to see it or not. Today, when I open the daily papers and see endless articles about weight loss, looking beautiful, it makes me wonder. If an overweight Chennaiite was offered a twenty kilo weight loss in exchange for never seeing a flower seller again, what would he or she choose? If a man in Delhi could get a Mercedes in exchange for a city without balloonwallas? Or a Mumbai hotshot be given a villa in Spain for a city without vada-pav vendors, sandwich stalls, dabba wallas and shoeshines? Would we wave them all goodbye?

* * *

What is the price of a start in life? A steel drum fitted with a tap, filled with sweet, hot tea and carried on a bicycle costs Rs.5,000 to Rs 7,000, including the rent of a small room in a city, and the price of a kerosene stove and materials.

A new cycle rickshaw costs Rs 2,000 to Rs 5,000.

An ironing cart and a heavy iron cost Rs 7,000 to assemble.

Where did we spend our last Rs 5,000 or Rs 7,000? Do we remember?

Toymakers and Heroes

Pagol mon, mon re,

Mon kano aeto pagol hoi?

(Crazy heart, o crazy one, why is my heart this crazy?)

Song sung for author by toymaker Dipen Das, Jaipur, October
2001

The decisive leap into making toys and selling them on city streets for a living is an act of courage that bears comparison with the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell. In *Hero With A Thousand Faces* Campbell describes the hero's adventure as seen in the myths and legends of diverse cultures all around the world. The hero is an ordinary individual who becomes uncomfortable with his circumstances because he feels impelled to go out and look for something that seems to be missing. This is the 'call' and he lays the foundation for his heroism by responding to this call. When he sets out, he meets many obstacles and is dejected and defeated at several places where he feels tempted to abandon the quest. But he meets helpers too, and his own resolve is strengthened till he can reach journey's end.

He finds what was missing and then returns to his life as it was before the quest began. Only now, things are different—the hero has brought back with him something that anyone can recognise as a gain—a special quality of self-assurance, a unique skill, a

magical object that heals sufferers in the community. Whatever be the variations in the individual tales, the pattern remains the same. In short, myths tell us about ordinary mortals who stuck their necks out, took risks, faced difficulties, almost gave up, received help and continued with their quest. Such heroes come back to a reception from their community that fully reflects their status as change bearers and role models. The hero is just like us, only he or she is the best version of what we can be.

When the toymaker steps out of the circle of exploitation and the powerlessness it produces, he or she is taking a grave risk. Others warn against the consequences of such a decision. He has to decide that he will no longer drive a contractor-owned rickshaw for long hours, or do manual labour (called baidari or oxen work in Indore) but will instead try to make and sell his own products. The 'call' has already been received, usually in the form of a self-employed person who seems to be able to make a decent living, or by observing closely some toys sold. The faint stirring of excitement, the grasp of the toy's construction and design that the toymaker experiences when he thus examines it, is a reflection of his own suitability to play the role of the object's creator.

But immediate success rarely follows such a momentous decision. There is a definite period of experimentation, when the toymaker struggles to achieve perfection in mastering the materials that make up the toy, and the skills that produce the best results. This period is almost always under the guidance of an *ustad* or guru-mentor. During this time, the toymaker has to bear both costs and criticism. While his family and friends look askance at what they perceive is his romanticism, the *ustad* demands at least some *chai-paani ka kharcha* or regular infusions of petty cash to teach him his skills. The toymaker has to navigate this phase based solely on his belief that he will be a success, that what he has set out to do—have his own, independent livelihood—is a worthwhile and achievable object.

Illness, failure of certain toys, family problems and crippling financial difficulty that makes it impossible to be lavish or adventurous with materials, are constant companions on the journey, and any one of these is sometimes sufficient to make an individual abandon the quest. However, the one who perseveres, usually becomes a familiar figure in particular neighbourhoods in the city, where he arrives at a certain hour every evening, selling his stock of windmills or dancing paper figures or trumpets or goggles in the company of balloon sellers, chivda, peanut or channa sellers, ice-cream men and cotton candy makers.

Help is at hand for him when he needs it, but the crises that afflict his individual life are his alone and have to be weathered. What plays the biggest part is his faith in himself. By keeping this faith alive, the toymaker is drawing on the many who have gone before him, even as he inspires those who come after. As Campbell reminds us, '...we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world.'¹

What the toymaker slays is his helplessness at the hands of exploitation and authority. What he surmounts is his lack of education and recognition from the world around him. By confronting his fears and his inner devils that urge submission, caution, and convention, the toymaker actually overcomes victimhood. No middlemen are spinning webs of exploitation around these individual urban toymakers. No policeman is able to give them more than the occasional beating. The toymaker collects his materials, assemble his joyful objects in the confines of his own home, often a small, windowless room, and goes out to sell his wares at a place and time of his choice. Such a self-directed existence is enviable at all times, and is even more

precious among the poor and deprived. By the way he has chosen to live, the toymaker shows others around him how they, too, can live—if they dare.

This commitment to a vocation that involves the use of skills acquired through effort and executed by hand does make the toymaker a craftsman. But in the urban scenario, the man who makes paper and string and gum 'mela' toys is actually very different from the craftsman who churns out India's traditional handicrafts, including toys. For some years now, our interest in our Indianness and our preoccupation with what is distinctively Indian has led us to fetishise and flaunt artifacts that have been crafted by artisans who possess vast storehouses of traditional techniques and skills. Sunil Khilnani has called this the 'commodification of Indianness'. As he quite graphically describes it, 'The workings of the market are creating a pan-Indian domestic class of consumers who wish to have diversity packaged and served up to them. The new taste for unfamiliar food from other parts of the country...domestic ornament, vaastu, astrology, and now a search for new travel destinations, all are signs of this new hunger for consuming India.'²

This hunger is fed by images of India that underline the traditional, the glorious, the received, rather than the improvised, the instant, the sometimes undeniably tacky. So Indian toys often equate with Channapatna or Ettikoppaka toys, where toymaking has received recognition as a craft, and design initiatives and investment have been added to what the craftsmen already possess. Such a conception of Indian crafts and craftsmen had a lot of weight in the early years of the twentieth century when E B Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy were trying to combat the functional, utilitarian British streak that could not appreciate the inherently beautiful as well as practical aspects of Indian crafts. There was much nostalgia at this time for the pride of place the craftsman occupied in ancient India under kings and emperors, and the splendid creation he engaged in, creating objects that continue to hold us in awe in the present. 'Indian

society presents to us no more fascinating picture than that of the craftsman as an organic element in the national life. Broadly speaking, he is associated with that life in one of three ways: as a member of a village community; as a member of a guild of merchant craftsmen in a great city; or as the feudal servant of the king, or chieftain of a temple.¹³ Thus Coomaraswamy begins his book on *The Indian Craftsman*.

But the difference between such a craftsman and the toymaker on the street will immediately be evident even to a reader who has just reached Chapter 3 of this tome. Our street vendor toymaker has undoubtedly received something from India's traditions, but these are likely to be folk or subterranean traditions of popular knowledge that have been more a part of general survival tricks than the creation of enduring art. He is also much freer in the present, than those craftsmen and artisans who form part of traditional wood, leather, weaving or carving communities. Such artisans are being inexorably crushed in the present by being made to churn out their artifacts for consumers without any of the original freedom in which they worked. They exemplify the artisans described at the Third Conference of India's Traditional Science and Technologies, and cited in the previous chapter. The direct and spontaneous relationship they enjoyed with their materials has been broken. The product they make is under instruction and order. Even if such gleaming objects are later displayed in government showrooms or high-priced shops, they are not taking the benefits of these sales directly to the craftsmen themselves.

By contrast, the toymaker on the street is his own master. As toymaker Ramesh of Indore put it for me, 'Apne dhandhe mein yeh baat achchi hai ki isme apna fayda hai. Kisi aur ke liye apan ghate mein nahi pad rahe. Apan hi seth, apan naukhar!' (The good thing about our work is that our profits go to ourselves, we are not losing out for anyone's sake. We are the boss, and the worker!) So if the toymaker has to be a hero tying us to our glorious past, let us visualise him as a court jester rather than the craftsman in

service of the king. Let us imagine him as the man who repaired things in the village, who gave new life to what was forgotten, rather than as someone who worked with virgin pieces of wood and stone to make beautiful sculpture.

In fact, by his exercising a vigorous impulse of adaptation and response to the complex social and economic processes that act upon him, the toymaker has more in common with a modern artist than a craftsman engaged in making something defined by tradition. This adaptation is immediately perceivable in the objects themselves. Indian toymakers have revived the bow and arrow, the mace or 'gada' of Hanuman, and the sword, in the past decade. These martial toys, which were always made in crude forms for children to play with, have acquired a sophisticated, finished appearance, even on the street. Gleaming golden and silver and shiny plastic paper in metallic colours is used to cover the toy weapons. This is because toymakers are trying to live up to the mythological serials that have become such a staple fare of TV. If there is *The Sword of Tipu Sultan* on television, there is a corresponding, gleaming sword available to any child who can get a parent to part with Rs. 10. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* sagas first brought back the bows and arrows. Unfortunately, the current confrontational scenario between communities has given a sinister connotation to these toys, and made them less than desirable as playthings. But toymakers will find a way out of that, too, should demand dwindle.

A very ingenious party toy is made up by sticking two plastic funnels together with cello tape, and making three holes in one of them. These holes hold folded tubes of shiny, coloured plastic paper. When the toy is blown like a trumpet, it makes an ear-splitting sound, and three 'horns' emerge from it as the paper tubes unfold. When martial toys are no longer attractive, the toymaker will invent fresh novelties to amuse and delight. But this is provided the conditions still exist for him to do so. If a lack of demand, extreme poverty and the factors that push people in the 'informal sector' into ever increasing marginalisation

persist, the ingenuity and inventiveness of the urban Indian toymaker is bound to be a casualty. In my view, such a loss is on par with the loss of a special technique to cast bronze that we have inherited as a tradition from the time of the Cholas.

For, even though the toys they make do not always meet our canonical requirements of good taste, beauty and traditional purity, urban toymakers are taking our culture forward in the manner of modern artists. Comparing the art of today with the painting done for Mughal patrons, K G Subramanyan thus describes the modern artist, 'He is not generally a hereditary craftsman, nor part of a professional guild; he is an independent creative man and does not answer to the needs of a definite patron or social group; he does not generally depend on widely-shared theme structures, nor necessarily take recourse to common skill spectra or pictorial conventions; his response to or dependence on any of the earlier stylistic stages is on the basis of personal or aesthetic choice...'⁴

In the context of urban street toys, one may find the three horned funnel-trumpet in the midst of a sea of windmills and bamboo-balloon blowers. Although imitation is inevitable once a toy is brought on to the street, individual makers 'specialise' in a particular toy, or 'item' as they put it. This is purely on the basis of their own view of their personal ability, the attractiveness of the toy, a perceived demand for it, and such other factors. The toymaker is very much on the ball, an alert and discerning creator.

When I describe my attempts to track down toys and their makers, later in the book, there will be many stories that convey how toymakers make use of locally available materials. A whole series of toys is created from the thick cardboard cones used to spool thread in textile mills. From kaleidoscopes in Ahmedabad to trumpets that have a blast like a ship's horn in Agra, these cones have a life well beyond their existence in the mill. But this life is given them by a maker who is an avid communicator in every sense of the word. This quality of communication has also been

remarked on by K G Subramanyan in the context of modern art. 'In a world where we talk of one man being equal to another, or of each person having latent creative potential, and are able to see aesthetic qualities in street graffiti and feel the poetry and punch of common speech, to think of art as a privileged commodity to be bought and sold by the affluent and to be communed with by a handful of specialists is, to say the least, anachronistic... But if one thinks of art in terms of communication (even if it is privileged communication), it radically changes the horizons... while the commodity model tries to bind an artist to one mode of expression (or commodity profile) making him a specialist, the communication model (in analogy with literature) gives him the flexibility of reaching out at various levels of expression, of lesser or greater complexity in structure and content, to various kinds of people, or to the same person at various response levels.'⁵

The toymaker is demonstrably engaged in such communication with the outside world. The structure and content of what he creates is only partly based on traditional models, and draws on the renewed resources of current reality. The point at which we meet the urban toymaker's work with our own ideas and desires, what Subramanyan calls the 'skirmishing' of our respective 'sensibility-circuits' creates one of the most interesting interfaces of ordinary urban life. To lose the possibility of this two-way communication seems a very high cost to pay for the plastic platitudes parading as toys in our world today.

Are we to reward our toymaker-heroes with neglect and indifference, or with fulsome praise that holds no real initiative to sustain their efforts? The issue is one we have to decide quickly, rather than put on the same back burner that holds other concerns of the urban poor.

* * *

The best tea I have ever tasted in my life came out of a milky glass tumbler, made by a silver-haired man in a roadside tent in

Allahabad. I had just stumbled off a bus, made drowsy even by the short ride from Varanasi, and the tea tasted like a combination of nectar and all the liqueurs ever brewed by the gods in their respective abodes. It was hot outside, climbing up to the high thirties, and no wonder, the month was April, the year 2000. But this hot drink lost none of its appeal from the summer temperature, or the dusty surroundings. It was, undeniably, wonderful.

Most staggering of all was the price, when asked. This nectar-like tea cost Re 1.

We lose the value of some very precious and wondrous things, still, mercifully, among us. And all because, they cost so little.

‘Go Out and Play? How?’

*Lakdi ki kaathi, kaathi pe ghoda
Ghode ki dum pe jo mara hathoda
Dauda dauda dauda, ghoda dum uthake dauda!*

(Song sung by children in the film *Masoom*, 1982)

Our ancestors understood the significance of play. The sun, moon and stars, the benevolent and malevolent aspects of nature, the whole shifting cosmos and the myriad moments of human existence—all this was explained as the lila of God—proof of His playfulness, the ultimate sport. Play rarely had such a central place in other cultures. However, this does not mean that children had boundless opportunities to play at all times in our history, or that play received equal attention as other forms of human endeavour, such as science or architecture, astrology, or economics. It was just that instances of play abounded in our myth and folklore, and play received legitimacy from varied sources, whether this was a description of Krishna playing with his cowherd friends in bharatanatyam, or Siva and Parvati playing cosmic dice in sculpture and painting.

If play had such pride of place in cultural terms, childhood was not too far behind. The longing for a child, and the intense tapasya (penance) undertaken to receive such a child is a familiar theme in our stories, whether it is Hanuman’s mother, Anjana, going

without food and water for twelve years, or King Dasaratha performing pujas and yajnas. In addition, this child, when it arrives is really God Himself, so that some wonderful years can be spent in adoring Him in the form of a precious infant. In fact, Tulasidas has described in the *Ramcharitmanas* how the awesome form of God dismays Kausalya, and she asks for Him to appear like a baby that she can really mother¹. What can then be more priceless than this child, this lovable form of the divine?

And yet, if we look around today at the place children and play occupy in 21st century India, we could be forgiven for thinking that these stories and their inspiration come from a land far away from our own.

The toiling children at our neighbourhood tyre repair shop, restaurant, grocer or vegetable shop are more out of the pages of medieval Europe rather than a continuation of our own child-friendly culture. Anuradha Kumar discusses in an article the impact of historian Philippe Aries' book *Centuries of Childhood*, in which he had pointed out that the very concept of childhood was a late 19th century-early 20th century phenomenon. 'In the medieval world a seven-year-old was already an adult...most young people were apprenticed, became workers in the fields (later, after the Industrial Revolution, in the factories) and generally entered fully into the adult society at a very early age. Even in the artwork of the period, there are no children, though there are babies. Children appear as little adults, whose gesticulations, dress, expressions and mannerisms are all adult. According to Aries, artists couldn't paint young people as children because they were not children. In their cultures they were little adults, and this is precisely what the artists saw. Childhood is a later historical creation,'² writes Kumar.

In the context of our present history, we can rephrase the above statement. Today, in India, childhood is a luxury, available to some children, and rendered unavailable to others by crippling circumstances. Thus, the poet Narayan Surve, now in his

seventies, remembers being hired in a Mumbai mill after his father died, when he himself was just ten or twelve years old.

I carried a tiffin-box to the mill since childhood

I was cast the way a smith forges a hammer

I learnt my ropes working on a loom

Learnt on occasion to go on a strike

Here by the sea, my father died

Struggling to his last breath:

I was hired then by a wheezing foreman

Who put me on his loom³

(From *Mumbai*)

If we understand childhood as freedom from endless work and responsibilities, as wholesome nutrition and good education, as care and nurture from loving family members, and plenty of opportunities for play and entertainment, then the child labourers in our society are far removed indeed from such a blessed state.

But if we understand childhood to be that state of unfettered imagination, where the spirit overcomes every obstacle placed in its path, and finds expression in regular outbursts of joy, then even the children at the tea shop and the flour mill are its blessed denizens. This is because such children in the most deprived of circumstances are privy to some of life's great pleasures—pleasures we have placed out of bounds for our own children in the inevitable protectionism of parenthood.

In April 2002, I visited the last surviving area of wilderness in Kandivli, Mumbai. This overgrown stretch, called Tulzon, has a long tar road running alongside scrub jungle and trees. Local residents come to take evening walks on the road, while more adventurous youngsters go picnicking or necking in the bushes, as is their particular preference. Right in the middle of this green pocket, such a contrast to the cratered moon desert landscape of the surrounding suburbs, is a lake, ringed by undergrowth where

water birds are perched. A small island in the lake holds a gnarled, twisted tree that has an awesome silhouette.

My friend took me bird-watching to this area on this summer evening, and we were armed with binoculars and camera. It is impossible not to feel disturbed by the masses of plastic you see in places, or the white ring of Styrofoam refuse that lines the shore of the lake. But more redeeming sights awaited us. Slipping into dry clothes after a swim in the lake were Yuvraj and Ashok and Santosh—three boys between ten and thirteen. They hailed us with ‘hello’ and salutes, and when we responded, they arrived to help hold our hands so we could climb and sit under the gnarled tree on the island.

Initially they said they were in school, enjoying the vacations, but some more conversation revealed that one worked in a samosa stall, another worked for a mechanic, and only one was a ‘pure’ student staying with his parents. They exclaimed over the binoculars and how far they could see with them, and took pictures of my friend and me in the light of the setting sun. Their hair was wet and spiky, their faces were alight with curiosity and interest. They were working boys out enjoying a Sunday, but they were also just what they looked—happy children.

India is made up of urchins and children wandering unprotected in the most densely crowded places. Not all of these are living carefree lives. Some of them are being subjected to abuse and ill-treatment that can bring the taste of salt into the mouths of those who even hear about it. But these urchins are also climbing, swimming, jumping, running, yelling in the peculiar and unmistakable manner of children. In fact, many of the privileges these urchins enjoy are denied to our own ‘well-brought-up’ children. What these children experience of life in its joyful form actually sustains them even into adulthood, when the grey accumulation of adverse circumstances is bound to produce an inevitable cynicism. We may regard the unsupervised, unsanctioned happiness of these urchins as the life-enhancing

memories they will need, as they traverse the daunting terrain of an increasingly joyless world.

In fact, Narayan Surve remembers swimming on the Mumbai beaches with his friends just as he remembers the years spent at the mill. No childhood can be uniformly bleak—simply because it is a child who is living it, and children have the knack of finding light among the scraps. For every rag-picker child who has become addicted to life-threatening substances in the city, there are fifty for whom the biggest ‘high’ comes from a swim with friends. Let us remember this every time we are tempted to clutch our heads over the awful state of our children. Our children are as they were meant to be. It is we who are letting them down in virtually every area of our lives.

In November 2001, I was part of a four-day event in Bangalore titled ‘Celebrating Creativity and the Child’. This was a workshop organised by the India Foundation for the Arts, with various individuals and institutions they have supported in the arts working as resource persons with groups of children. Schoolchildren attended the event in groups, and they had a choice of two activities out of the four or five that were offered. That is, they could learn dance movements in the morning, and have fun with clown theatre in the afternoon. Or they could learn about music or how to make paper. The choice was left to the children themselves, and a mixed group formed around the person or persons conducting each session.

I taught children how to make simple toys from everyday materials, and also introduced them to a street-vending toymaker from their city, who taught them how he made his particular product—a windmill made with shiny, metallic coloured ‘polyester’ paper. The four-day experience, with opportunities to observe over 650 children made me keenly aware of how much the culture of play has changed around us.

In both the morning and afternoon sessions, there was a short period which I used to mark as a break between making one toy

and the next. In this period, the children had to stand in two lines and take turns rolling an old scooter tyre around the campus of the Karnataka Chitra Kala Parishath where the event was being held. A stout stick was provided as assistant, and I expected this to be a happy activity that everyone could participate in.

It was happy all right, especially when the tyre rolled away unpredictably from the hands of inexperienced rollers. Much laughter, confusion, cheering and yelling prevailed. But I could not help noticing some important things. Firstly, it was the very first time that the majority of the children had been introduced to such a commonplace object that simply begs to be played with. Girls had to be prodded to do it, in many cases. I had to look stern and say it was 'compulsory'! Most children wanted help and instructions—they looked at me and the volunteers with such pleading looks that I really wondered if they had ever played any game that had no rules, did not require training and that nobody kept score of. It looked as if they had not.

Secondly, the class divide—that yawning gap between the protected middle-class and the children from the poorer schools, and children's shelters, was very visible in several significant ways. The children from these schools thought this whole tyre thing was a lark, in fact they thought it a bit silly that someone should actually set aside a time for it with such ceremony. They effortlessly rolled the tyre downhill and up dale, looping it around a much bigger area than the 'beginners' could manage. They showed this same quality of the born 'naturals' in the toys they were taught to make. After all, a handkerchief converted into a parachute and a matchbox made into a rattle were things they had thought of and done before. Even the more complex toys, such as a paper figure with sectioned, movable limbs that danced up and down like Michael Jackson, were not much of a challenge to them. They finished quickly and without fuss, even when the toy required several ingredients that were distributed in separate phases. In contrast, the 'decent' and 'well-brought-up' children kept up an endless chant of requests and

complaints—'My arm is lost, Miss (meaning the puppet's arm)' or 'He's taken my thread, Miss', or 'Miss, please put this string round my stone', 'Please blow up my balloon', 'Please help me finish this!' It was obvious that life lived up to their expectations, and people did as they asked, as long as they remembered to preface their remarks with 'Please'.

But the biggest difference among the children from different economic backgrounds did not lie in the realm of manners. It related to their idea of possession, and brought home to me in a very poignant way how people placed differently in life value the things around them. Once the poorer children had created their toy, they treated it as a common object, something to share, play with, even eventually destroy. Sirajuddin, a teenager from one of the organisations that had brought working children for the event, finished making the movable Michael Jackson figure with a speed that made me think he could make them to sell. As soon as he had made one, he would give it away. In contrast, the better-off children would labour to painstakingly put together their toy, then carefully label it with their name and class, so that they could take it home and show their parents. This was as it should be, and all would have stayed peaceful between the two socially separated groups of children, if it had not been for a chance discovery. One of the toys the children learnt to make was a balloon that always lands on its feet because of a piece of cardboard that it is attached to. No matter how you throw it around, it always lands flat on the cardboard piece.

We were making our toys next to a cottage picturesquely thatched with coconut fibre. One of the more adventurous throws of the balloon landed on the thatched roof, where the balloon waved in the breeze, looking as if it grew out of the thatch. This sight was enough to inspire several more of the children to throw their balloons on to the roof, and they received more encouragement from a TV cameraman, who just then began panning our merry group. Now there was a virtual scramble for balloons among the boys—to grab and throw on to the roof—and these included the

rows of carefully placed balloons, all with names and class and school written on the cardboard base, which waited on a nearby rock for their makers to take them home to proud families. In a trice, every balloon had been thrown up, where no one could reach it and bring it down again.

I hugged and patted and soothed as best I could, the maternal instinct to comfort being fully aroused by the sight of tender children who had been robbed. But even as I comforted, I was thinking, how could I explain to these children that the others who had taken their balloons felt they had done no wrong? How could I explain to them, that while they cried over the loss of a balloon, what the other children were deprived of from birth, was a far greater loss? All I could hope for was that some of these children, from the fact of having gone through the whole making-toys-meeting-people exercise, would have received the seeds that would one day sprout into the flowering tree of compassion and wisdom.

More than any other factor in today's parenting and education of children, I worry about whether we are giving them that 'access to enough of the world, including our own lives and work in that world' that will enable them to 'see what things are truly important to us and to others' so that they are able to 'make for themselves a better path into that world than we could make for them'. John Holt describes this need for access to the world in *How Children Learn*. It worries me to think of the ever narrowing areas of experience that our children are growing up in, the structured nature of their play and even their leisure hours, the reduced opportunities they have for experimentation, dreaming and shared mischief, the continued emphasis on learning for a particular objective, competition, success and everything else.

Taking ourselves very seriously indeed, as befits these advanced times, we think of play as a 'cognitive learning exercise' or the need for games and toys to teach 'problem solving' or 'understanding the environment'. Somewhere, surely, we are

missing the whole point, the core of being a child and a human being, that is being drowned out more successfully with each passing generation. The British left us over fifty years ago, and if we were being brought up with the 'traditional' values of our culture, surely we should have seen the results by now? Or if our education and parenting was imbued with the values that are intended to make us a just and humane society, surely we would have seen a move towards that too? Instead we become ever more inured to the plight of the billion that make up our nation, and our discontent spills out in ever more vicious displays of hatred and violence.

We have lost the true meaning of our environment, even while we mouth politically correct slogans on June 5, World Environment Day. Children may be made to form human chains in metros, given speeches about forests and wildlife, but are they being given any insights into their immediate surroundings and the people who inhabit these surroundings? James Hillman gives an account of what 'environment' could actually mean in his book *The Soul's Code* that puts forward the 'acorn' theory of an individual's character and calling. '...why not admit, as does deep ecology, that the environment itself is ensouled, animated, inextricably meshed with us, and not fundamentally separate from us?'⁴ he asks.

'Environment' then, would be imagined well beyond social and economic conditions, beyond the entire cultural setting, to include every item that takes care of us every day...It becomes impossible to exclude this bit of environment as irrelevant in favor of that bit as significant, as if we could rank world phenomena in order of importance. Important for whom? Our understanding of importance itself has to change; instead of 'important to me', think of 'important to other aspects of the environment.' Does this item nurture what else is around, not merely us who are around? Does it contribute to the intentions of the field of which we are only one short-lived part?"

The toymaker is on our city streets, but our children are not seeing him. We shield them from his toys that may be dirty, we think. We point out bigger, better, brighter things for them to own and play with. And all the while, we are cutting our children off from their environment—the part that lives and breathes and feels like them.

For the November 2001 workshop with children, I had relied for inspiration on *The Joy of Making Indian Toys* by Sudarshan Khanna. This inexpensive but invaluable book by the design expert who pioneered an interest in India's folk and dynamic toys, has diagrams and exercises that help children learn the scientific principles behind many of the toys that can be made with everyday materials lying around the house. The toys made with these materials were a natural part of the growing up of children in the days before TV played such a large part in our lives. Today, they are still made by the children from whom future toymakers could arise—the carefree, urchin like experimenters from the poorer parts of the city, or the villages, for whom the process of working with different materials is an important part of learning.

By denying our children access to these toys, or the opportunity to interact with their makers, we limit our children's childhood in a way that dozens of Gameboys and Pokemon toys cannot recompense. We handicap his or her ability to discover things for themselves. 'We do not ask or expect a child to invent the wheel starting from scratch. He doesn't have to. The wheel has been invented. It is out there, in front of him. All that I am saying is that a child does not need to be told what wheels are and what they are for, in order to know. He can figure it out for himself, in his own way, in his own good time...The whole culture is out there. What I urge is that a child be free to explore and make sense of the culture in his own way. This is as much discovery as I ask of him, a discovery that he is well able to make,'⁵ says John Holt in *How Children Learn*.

The danger is not only that we make our children less socially sensitive in an environment sanitised of street toys and their makers, but also that we do not allow their intelligence free rein and so curtail a part of their imagination that will have important consequences for our society as a whole. Our children regularly do well in Maths Olympiads, we produce lakhs of engineers every year, every form of abstract thinking is looked up to in our society. But because we are a society of such numbers, and have a tradition of occupational social division embodied by the caste system, work done with one's hands has a lowly connotation that we have still not been able to grow out of.

But the tinkering, repairing, remaking instinct that makes us extract the last ounce of use from every single object needs hands-on application if it is to continue, and if it has to have any long term significance for our survival as a people. If America has a single trait that seems enviable to me, it is the tradition of making things for yourself with your hands. *Home Improvement* is such an attractive programme on TV not merely because it presents Tim Allen's cute version of the war of the sexes. It makes one itch to have ready materials available that would allow us to create furniture or boats, or even cars. In India, we are still far removed from these creative fantasies. There are far too many carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers and other professionals who need the money we would spend on home improvement, and there are too many taboos around being seen repairing your own chairs or even washing your windows. Which self-respecting 'saheb' does either?

And yet, if we could bring about a change in the attitude that harnesses our abstract thinking to our practical skills, the strides that we could make defy the imagination. Consider this: if the resourcefulness, ingenuity, and mastery over materials of our poor could be coupled with the abstract thinking, scientific education and 'braininess' of our upper middle class—what could this marriage not produce?

But who will bring the two together, the Indian poor, and the Indian rich?

* * *

An evening boat ride on the Ganga at Varanasi takes us, me and my 'panda' escorts, to Lalita Ghat to feed the fish. Our boatman, elderly, bearded, Raghunath Majhi, the epitome of sweet dignity, mixes the atta with water for the fish. We must take small pellets of this homely mix and watch the fish come to the surface and devour it.

After this minor diversion, our boat enters the water again, to take our place for watching the famed 'Ganga Aarti'. Many tourist boats are similarly bound for a berth. As Raghunath Majhi rows, a number of river urchins cling on to the sides and rear of the boat, hitching a ride. Their teeth gleam, as do their skin and hair. They call to each other, and are unbelievably deft among the traffic of the boats. I watch them with utter fascination, but I am also concerned about the extra pull they add to the boat, making Raghunath Majhi's task harder.

He occasionally bats at them with an oar. 'Chalo hato', he says. 'Hap!'

But his threats lack sting, and the urchins know this. They stay with us, till they find new sport, and dart away in the water.

Moments later, as Raghunath Majhi begins to glide into a parking spot, it occurs to me why his scolds lack conviction.

He remembers being exactly like them—a long time ago, but nevertheless.

'But Madam, What Will Happen?'

*Bhaiya ho bhaiya, bahini ho bhaiya,
sab milke badla Hindustan,
ki hamar bitva bhukha sutela ho Ram.
Rui ham dhunila, kapda banayila,
Kapda se bharal bazaar,
Ki hamar bitva nange hi sutela ho Ram
Gehun ham boyila, ann upjayila
Annva se bharela bazaar
Ki hamar bitva bhukha sutela ho Ram.
(O brother, O sister, the whole of Hindustan has changed,
But my child still goes hungry to bed.
I beat the cotton, wove it into cloth,
The cloth filled the market completely,
But my child still sleeps naked.
I sowed the wheat, made the grain sprout from soil,
The heaps of grain filled the market
But my child still goes hungry to bed.)*

From Bhojpuri artisans' song *Karigar ke Dard* quoted in a report
of the Third Conference of India's Traditional Science and
Technologies, Varanasi, 1998.

In searching for itinerant, street-selling toymakers, I had to adopt
a lifestyle quite as mobile as my subjects. I began work in Varanasi

in April 2000, and went on to Jabalpur, and Damoh, in Madhya Pradesh. The next month, I was in Hyderabad in peak summer, then in Agra, Mathura and Vrindavan in August. September and October saw me part of Calcutta's frenetic Durga Puja crowd, and in January 2001, I was in Allahabad at the Mahakumbh Mela when the killer earthquake struck Gujarat. In April that year, I touched Kanyakumari, and the tourist cities of Tamil Nadu—Madurai, Trichy, and Thanjavur, with forays to Kumbakonam and Chidambaram. By July, it was time to visit Maharashtra, namely Pune and Satara, and in August, I was in Madhya Pradesh again, this time in Bhopal and Indore. In September and October 2001, I travelled to Delhi, Jaipur and Chandigarh. In November, I went to Bangalore, and in January 2002, to Mysore and Hampi. In February, just before the disturbances relating to the shila daan at Ayodhya began, I concluded a trip to Bhubaneswar and Puri, and my last journey in search of toymakers took me to Mumbai, followed by Ahmedabad and Vadodara in April 2002.

Railway dinners, rides in rickety cycle rickshaws, interviews conducted standing up in the midst of teeming markets and several dozen interested bystanders, and the pleasurable anticipation of discovering yet another facet of this huge, unwieldy, packed to bursting country became a familiar part of life. I avoided going to Bihar, because I was travelling alone most of the time, and I did not go to Kerala, because some visits in recent years had failed to show me any toymakers in the densest and most colourful areas. There had been huge loudspeakers spilling injurious sound, every manner of plastic and 'foreign goods', tons of attractive palm leaf, coconut shell and wooden handicrafts, but no toys of the invented, improvised, unexpected kind. The North-East states were likely to have an equal number of cane and shell handicrafts, and probably some very interesting folk toys too, I was sure. But these states were off the street toymaker-seller's map—it was mainstream, metro and small town India that such toymakers sought. Their sought after destinations were also mine. I did not worry unduly about missing Bihar. This

was because so many of the vendors and workers I met in the course of my work were Biharis. As one of them said to me with a trace of bitterness in Bhubaneswar, 'Bihari log pura India pe chaya hua hai. Lekin Bihar vaise ka vaise hi hai' (People from Bihar have proved themselves in every part of India, but Bihar remains exactly as it was.)

I recorded close to fifty interviews with toymakers and their family members, and spoke to dozens of other vendors, toymakers' neighbours, and the collaborators and guides who helped me find my subjects in each city. At every place there was a short period of suspense—would I actually find the people I was seeking? I enlisted the help of auto or cycle rickshaw drivers, and rode around the bazaar areas and the recreational spaces such as the Chandigarh lake, or the Lumbini Park and Necklace Road in Hyderabad. The sight of my first toymaker was always reassuring and a big relief. After this first contact, we had occasion to meet and talk, I visited their homes, and spent time taking pictures of them at work. The whole exercise ended in my forming relationships with the most unlikely people across the length of India.

Consider Anil and Rajkumar Pande for example. I met them as my rickshaw was approaching the extremely crowded and chaotic area around the Kasi Viswanath temple known as Godowlia. They came running up to me, dhotis flapping, part of the well-oiled and organised network exerting suitable pressure on pilgrims to part with their bucks. These men known locally as 'pandas' are a combination of priest-tout-guides and are masters of emotional blackmail. They had no idea that they would soon be recruited to help me find toymakers not only in Varanasi itself, but in nearby areas like Agalpura and Mirzapur.

Anil was a young man in his mid twenties, with a face like a vertical almond, brown eyes slanting upwards, unspeakably stained teeth, with pan ever present in his mouth, chapped lips, a discreet pundit tuft on the back of his head, and the dhoti-kurta-gamcha attire that was a mark of his trade. After he and his cousin

Rajkumar, slightly older and darker, had hustled and hassled me through the temple, I revealed to them that I was actually looking for something else. There was an excited conference among the pandas at the small shop where I had been made to part with my footwear, and buy prasad.

The result of this conference was that Anil and Rajkumar threw themselves wholeheartedly into my search, and met me every morning to cover many kilometres within the city and around it, to look for toymakers. They kept this up for a week, and Anil abandoned his panda outfit for ordinary 'pant and shirt' on some occasions, in keeping with the secular nature of his work! It was inconceivable that so much enthusiasm and effort should go without reward, and of course, I was paying them suitably to be my guides and protectors. But all the while, I was aware of the exploitative chain of greed, extortion and trading in human misery that lay behind my panda escort duo. Wherever we went, whether it was to interview and photograph our subjects on the Ghats, or take an evening ride in a boat, we were always under discreet observation by Anil's uncle, Suresh. I was uncomfortably aware that he was a 'commission man', that whatever handouts were being made to anyone in his presence had a good chance of reaching him. I had to walk almost a kilometre along the Ghats to pay Raghunath Majhi, before I was sure I was out of Suresh's earshot, even though he still had his eyes trained on us from a distance. The evening I was leaving, this man arrived to see me off at the Varanasi station in the middle of a power breakdown, in utter darkness. He just had to see if he could get an extra buck out of me. But I had been forewarned. Anil and Rajkumar had already collected their dues in the afternoon, and told me what to say to the 'uncle'. As I leaned out of the train when it began moving, I waved to Anil and Rajkumar Pande standing with folded hands, the picture of repellent servility. Next to them stood Suresh, who scented a plot, but had arrived too late to prevent it. Not all my guides and helpers were so politically incorrect. In Agra, I was lucky to meet Mohr Singh on the evening of my

arrival. Initially bemused by my interest in toymakers, who had just been his unremarkable fellow-sufferers in the city till then, Mohr Singh became a very committed helper after a few hours in my company. He took me in his cycle rickshaw to an area of the city where a 'Shravan Mela' was supposed to have been organised. We stopped on a busy city road, and enquired of a balloon selling lad, where the fair was. Speaking in the rapid fire Hindi of the typical Agra-dweller, Mohr Singh mentioned an impossible location that seemed miles away. I sensed his reluctance to go into the labyrinth of narrow lanes, so I asked him to wait on the main road by the balloon seller, while I searched for the mela.

I set off, and had soon asked directions so many times, and taken so many turns, that I wondered if I would ever be able to find my way back again to the spot where Mohr Singh was waiting to take me back to the guest house where I was staying. After a good twenty-minute walk, I reached a small maidan on which a modest Ferris wheel could be spotted from a distance. The ground was slushy—in some places the slush had turned to a settled green, with its accompanying cloud of mosquitoes. The crowd was thin, only a few giggly girls in bright salwar-kameezes and high heels, and some youths who seem born to drift across the canvas of Indian towns. Even the music from the ever-present loudspeakers did not seem so menacing. My heart sank. Was I going to draw an utter blank after such a long walk?

And then I heard the sound, at almost the same moment that my eyes alighted on a boy being hurried along by his parents, trying to blow a fearsome trumpet as he walked. The loud blast I had heard had been created by this contraption. It was made with the cardboard cone on which yarn is spooled in mills, with a balloon taped to it, and a bit of plastic pipe that you blew into. The cone acted like a loudspeaker which magnified the sound and the whole made an impressive sight because of the coloured balloon. 'Where did you get such a beautiful bhonpu?' I asked the boy, and he and his parents pointed out a man sitting on the ground and making these in a small lane where a merry-go-round had

been set up. I made the acquaintance of Kripal Saini of Meerut, former employee of a factory that made badminton shuttlecocks, and independent itinerant toymaker for the last eight years. Much relieved and cheered, I had a brief conversation with him and bought a decent number of trumpets, while excited child customers jumped all around us, then made an appointment to visit him the following afternoon for a longer chat.

The grubby lane where the merry-go-round stood had a mini temple, with a handkerchief sized clearing behind it. This was where a tent had been put up by Kripal Saini's friends and associates—the Ferris wheel man, the merry-go-round operator, their assistants and himself. I marked the spot and left, seriously wondering whether I would be able to make my way back to the road.

But twenty minutes later, I was back at the spot from where I had started and, most amazingly, Mohr Singh and the balloon seller were both waiting for me. As we chatted on the way back home, Mohr Singh confided that the balloon seller had just lost a tenner to him—my rickshawman had said I would return, and the balloon lad said I would not. However, neither had been convinced about my sincerity in searching for khilonewallas. Now, it seemed as if Mohr Singh was willing to look upon my quest with a little more respect. My forty-minute walk through slush and dung, and in the enforced intimacy of narrow lanes lined with houses, had not been in vain.

The next morning Mohr Singh presented himself at the guest house five minutes ahead of the appointed time. He smiled when he saw me, and courteously held the rickshaw steady, while I hauled my bulk aboard. What touched me most of all however, was his wet oiled hair, neatly slicked down after a bath, his fresh shirt and the fact that his whole appearance seemed a far cry from the previous evening. How else would he have told me that I was a madam worth taking some trouble for?

There was no dearth of engaging guides and helpers on the toymaker trail. In Hyderabad, balloon seller Shaikh Baba spent

several days taking me to the homes of toymakers he knew. From the first day, our auto driver also wanted to be a part of the exercise, so we became a 'team', although we had never met each other before. It was Shaikh Baba who really taught me what a close knit and affectionate community the vendors in a particular area form over the years. His daily beat has been the Lumbini Park entrance for some years, and this is how he views his fellow vendors, 'Hum log kya hai maloom, ek jagah uthte, baithte, ek jagah khate. Hamari biradari mein karobar ke liye paise nahin hai to chivde wale, ice cream wale, maal ke liye paise de dete. Baki kisi ke aage haath nahin phailate. Uparwale ke aage jate, ya apne karobar se madad lete.' (You know, we all (park vendors) sit together, eat together. Within this community, if we don't have money for doing business one day, the other vendors like the chivda seller, or ice cream man lend us some. We don't hold out our palms before anyone else. Either we pray to God above for help, or take help from others like us doing daily business.)

The safety and security provided by the networking among the people who became my guides, and their friends and associates in the town, was immense. Nowhere was this more evident than in Jaipur, where I landed at 12.45 am by the bus from Delhi, accompanied by my teenage daughter. Many of the auto men who mobbed us at the bus stand as soon as we alighted gave off the fruity aroma of country liquor, and even my seasoned sensibilities could not ward off some apprehension. But among all these men stood fresh-faced Kishan, almost twenty years old, with his waiting auto. I told him our destination, and sternly added, 'Pre-paid only!' to which he readily agreed. A few minutes later, he was helping us wake up the chowkidar at a haveli hotel, and by the time we had collected our bags we had also made a deal to be ferried around by his brother Mahender, who drove the auto in the daytime while Kishan slept after night duty.

I was doubtful about the value of Mahender's escort, in case he turned out to be the quintessential commission-driven auto rickshaw man from Indian towns, who drives you to select shops

and establishments where rapacious salesmen descend on you like vultures. Over the next three days, he did show occasional streaks of this behaviour, but my opening declaration to him that we would choose to go to places based on our need for them and not on the basis of the chappi (commission) he got, seemed to have had a salutary effect. (I had already been to Agra by then, and the vocabulary came in handy.) He took us for a Ramlila performance and to reasonable restaurants where we could feast on unlimited Rajasthani food, and also to the homes of Dipen Das and Salim, toymakers who lived in difficult-to-find areas.

During one of our forays into the densely packed neighbourhoods of the poorer part of town, Mahender turned into the street where his own home was. We met Pahelwaan, a slightly built young man who was Mahender's close friend, and seemed to be singularly thin for such a powerful nickname. 'Don't go by his looks, he's just the most amazing wrestler I know,' Mahender confided. 'He's dropped out of training now, but he could throw men twice his size when he was really training hard.' My daughter and I gave Pahelwaan suitably respectful smiles and I thought the encounter was just one fleeting moment as I turned to more serious business with the toymakers.

However, we were to see Pahelwaan one more time. I declined the services of Mahender's auto to take us to the bus stand for another midnight departure for Delhi the next day. After all, we had spent three days in his company and he had convinced us that Jaipur was safe enough for two females to careen about in, at all hours of the day and night. So I said we would make our own way, and we left the hotel in a strange auto, feeling curiously flat and holding our belongings close for comfort in the cool night air. Imagine our happiness when we were greeted at the bus stand with a glad cry of recognition, even before the auto had stopped. It was Kishan, doing his familiar night duty of snaring newly arrived travellers to Jaipur. And next to him was Pahelwaan, who really proved those muscles in the casual way he handled our luggage.

Kishan and Pahelwaan settled us into bucket seats and went off to get us fragrant elaichi (cardamom) tea in little plastic tumblers. The flat feeling had disappeared, and my daughter and I could not help feeling lifted, looking indulgently at our co-passengers, some sleepy, some unaccountably animated, but all looking wonderful in the white light of the powerful bus stand tubelights. It was very much in order for us to feel so cheered. After all, what had been a mere departure for us had now turned into a farewell.

Pursuing toymakers was not always so joyous, or so rewarding, as I found out. The pace at which events unfolded in our continuing definition of 'identity' and 'nationhood' had their effects on my search. Janmashtami 2000 was supposed to be a triumphant discovery of toymakers in Mathura and Brindavan where pilgrims would converge. Instead I landed in a heavily policed town, where I was frisked, searched, and parted from camera and tape-recorder before being allowed to enter the Krishna temple. By the time they were ready to let me through, I was fighting tears of frustration and anger. The fairground had a giant wheel, and all the stalls that marked where a huge mela would have been held. But the whole place had a shuttered, desolate look. In the weeks before Janmashtami, communal riots had caused the mela to be called off, and on Janmashtami itself, a threat from the ISI was keeping the administration on its toes. My toymaker tally was virtually zero.

Similarly depressing was a Satara fairground on a monsoon evening—I was the only one of four visitors to have paid the price of Rs. 2 to enter a space where one could throw shies at a display of soaps and talcum, or buy some kitchen supplies. Around the temples of Tamil Nadu towns, I would find some toys on sale at shops selling incense and kumkum—but their makers were tucked away in villages, said the shop keepers. Ironically, the toy sellers on the street were selling plastic replicas of the original handmade toys.

All these could be said to be the built in minuses of a project of this kind, with its singleminded random swoops across unfamiliar towns. I understood this, and took my reversals as part of the whole. What was harder to bear, however, were the cynical reactions of people. My talking about toymakers invariably brought forth strong responses from almost everyone with whom I had a conversation. Most responses were positive, the person concerned expressing satisfaction that such toymakers were being sought and studied. But every so often, I would meet an individual who looked unconvinced or superior, pursed his or her lips and shook his or her head. 'But tell me', such a person would say, 'do you think your work will really bring any change into the lives of these people? Do you think anyone will benefit by your 'study' and 'research'? Are you convinced that your project is at all useful? If so, tell me madam, what will happen?'

I replied to these questions in the appropriate style, depending on the context where they were posed. With fellow passengers on the train, I could just mildly brush off the query and move on to other mutually inoffensive topics. With fellow guests in someone's drawing room, I would take the exercise a little further, provoking some discussion about our society as a whole. But whether I did one or the other, I could not help feeling a deep dissatisfaction with the whole question of 'Hoga kya? (What will happen?)' as it was asked.

This is because it seemed to me that the question was posed less out of a concern for the future of the poor toymaker and more out of a sense of outrage and indignation that such issues as the creativity of the poor were being addressed at all. It was obvious that the 'Hoga kya' brigade took for granted certain undeniable aspects of life and development in independent India. One of these is that the poor, if they are merely poor, have no rights at all. It remains for them to become desirable in some term—by the fact of their being Dalit, OBC, or Minority Community, and therefore fitting fuel for the rocket of a politician's ambition. Being concerned for people for the sheer fact of their poverty and

deprivation seems to have become almost passe, a forgotten notion of public life.

Also, the average person seems reconciled to a vast proportion of the country's population consisting of extremely poor people, without worrying at all about what this proportion represents, in terms of leaders, sportspeople, musicians, toymakers, even visionaries and philosophers who could remain lost to us by sheer dint of circumstance. No HRD Ministry is calculating the civilisational cost to India of so many of her people being rendered incapable of contributing to her continuing glory.

While the cynical questioners often thought me misguided and naïve, I had reason to find myself wondering about their naivete. How could these worthies assume that a single person should bring about the kind of colossal, complete, changes that would bring lasting relief for the poor? Such changes would take the strength of millions and several generations to accomplish, not the wondering aloud by a dewy eyed writer. What drove me forward was not the dream of a 'systemic' solution—I didn't have reason to believe in such solutions after crossing my twenties. What drove me was the conviction that it was impossible to bring a just, humane, and understanding society without each of us committing to become just, humane and the rest. The individual mattered to me, whether he or she stood on the side of the undifferentiated poor or the uncaring bourgeoisie. If I reached even one person, it was OK by me, but not, it would seem, to the doubters.

So while these questioners demanded answers to India's multiple problems from me, I stayed where I belong—among the questions.

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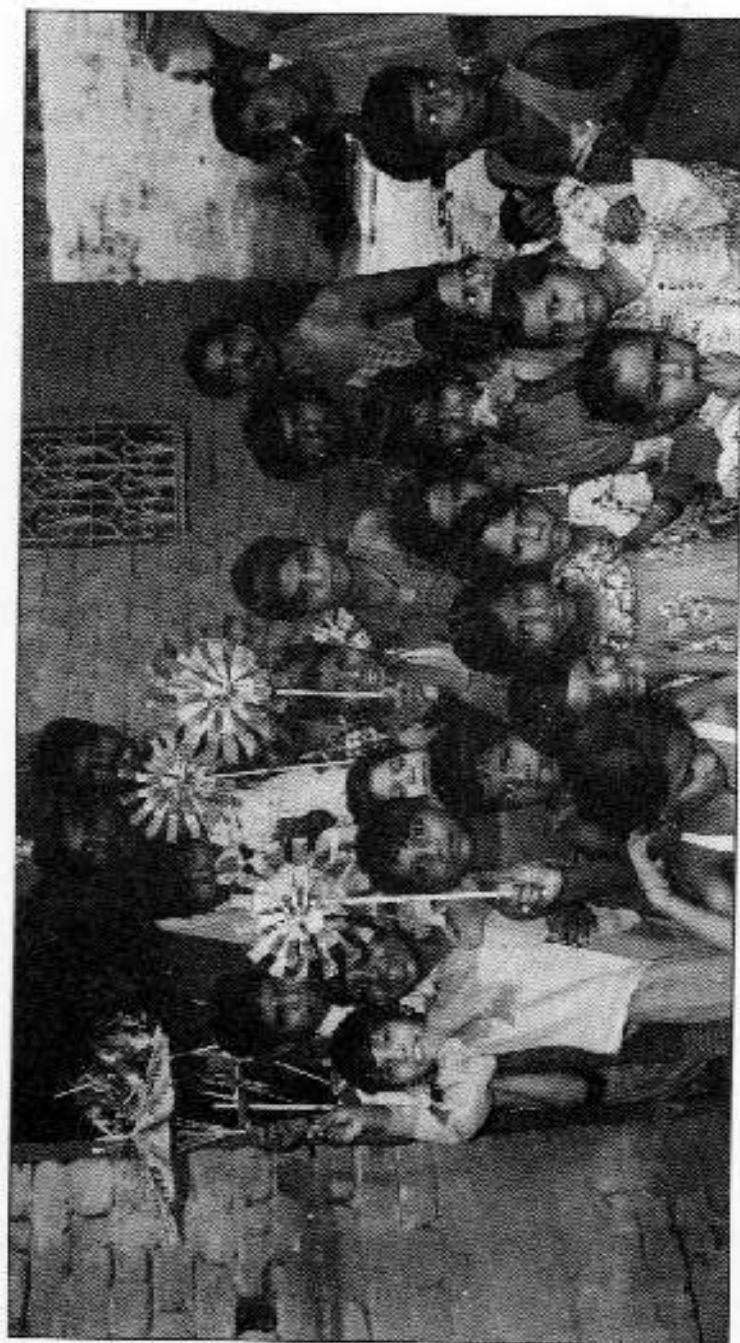
Tiny, with teeth like small pomegranate seeds, and hands and feet tipped with small, red-painted nails, Suguna is a winsome flower seller in our locality in Chennai. This child can charm the hardest heart to part with a buck or two for the fragrant wares

she carries, looped in an aluminium tray. I have always been a willing victim, and so are many others.

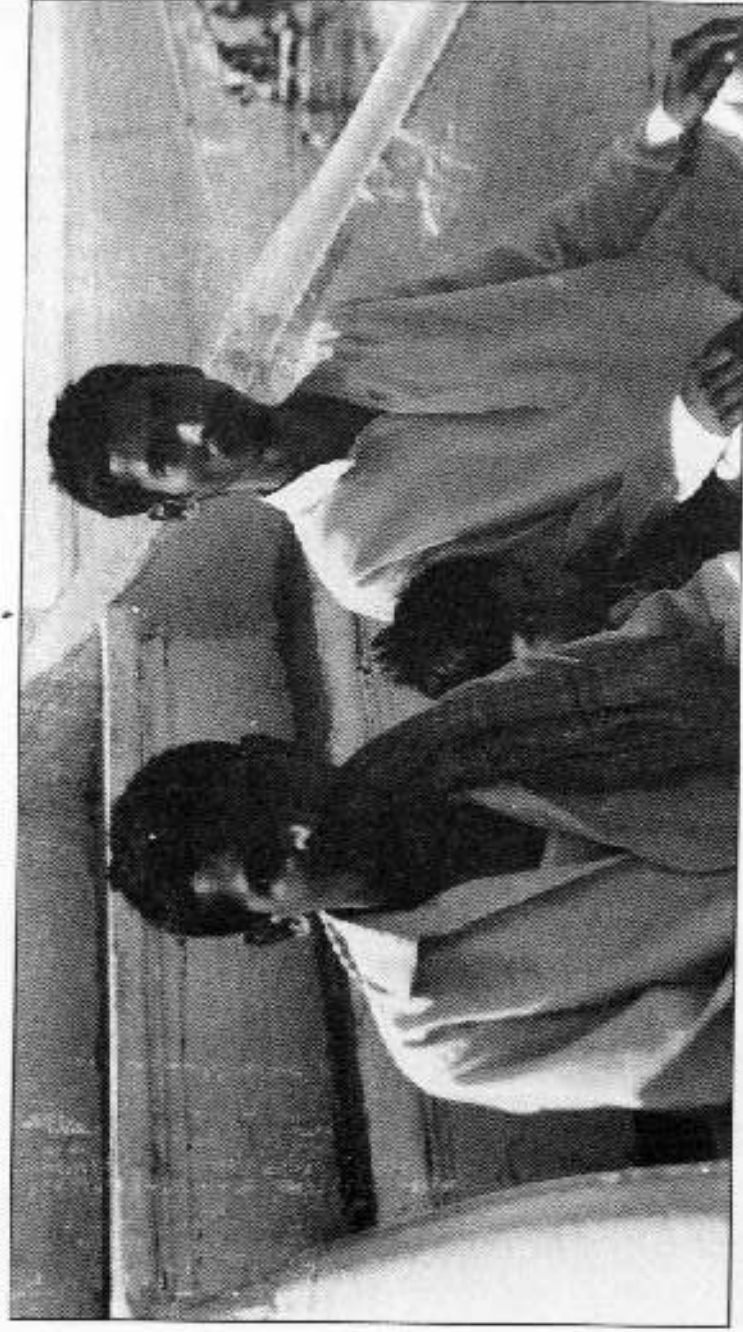
One day, as I wheeled my scooter away from a neighbourhood store, I heard the fruit stall lady berating her child—an ungainly girl of twelve or thirteen. 'You really are good for nothing at all,' she said. 'Can't sell a quarter of the flowers Suguna does.' The girl stared back in the sad, sullen manner of the adolescent, tears trickling down both cheeks while she just looked at this monster-mom. I was struck. Only minutes earlier, I had brushed aside the girl's offer of flowers when I entered the store.

What else was there to do? I parked my scooter again, walked up to the tearful girl and bought some flowers without either of us saying a word.

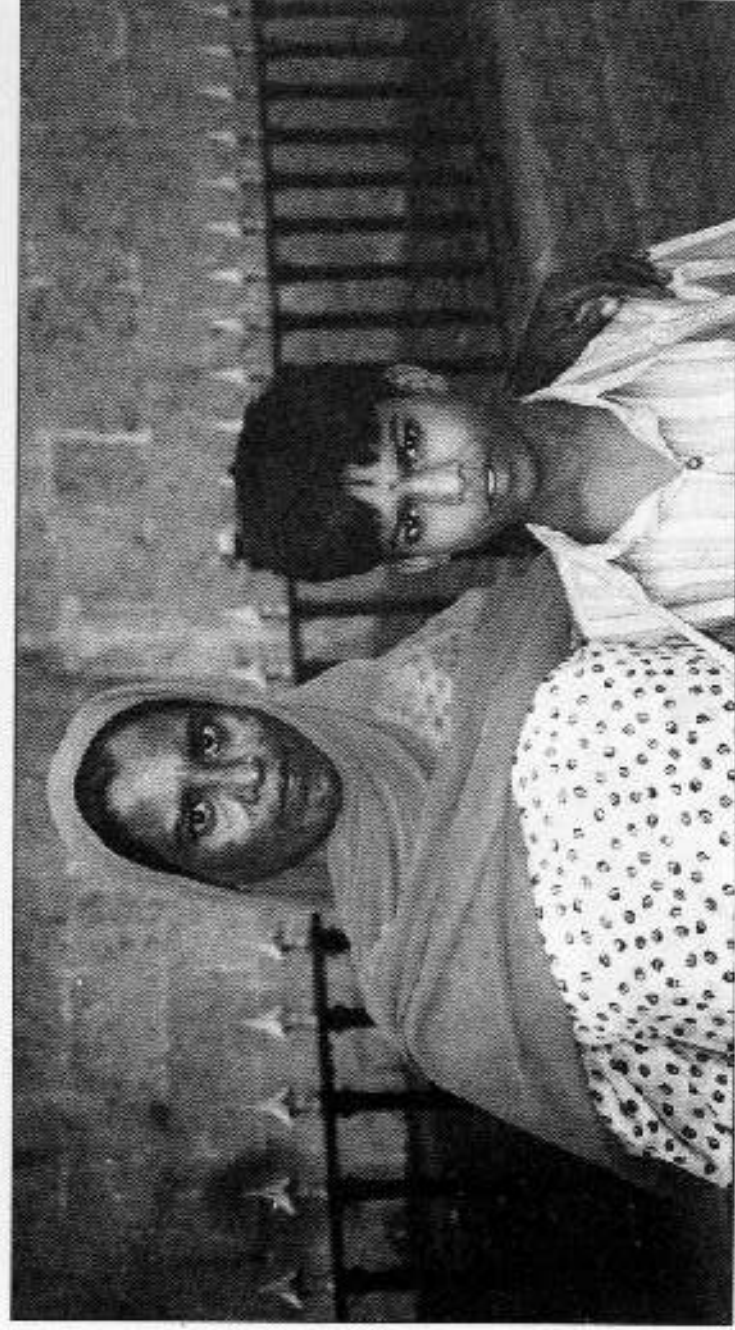
Very few things can be instantly remedied in our world.



Children in front of Dalehand's house, Agra.



Aril and Rajkumar Pande



Ameena Khatoon and Ghulam Nabi



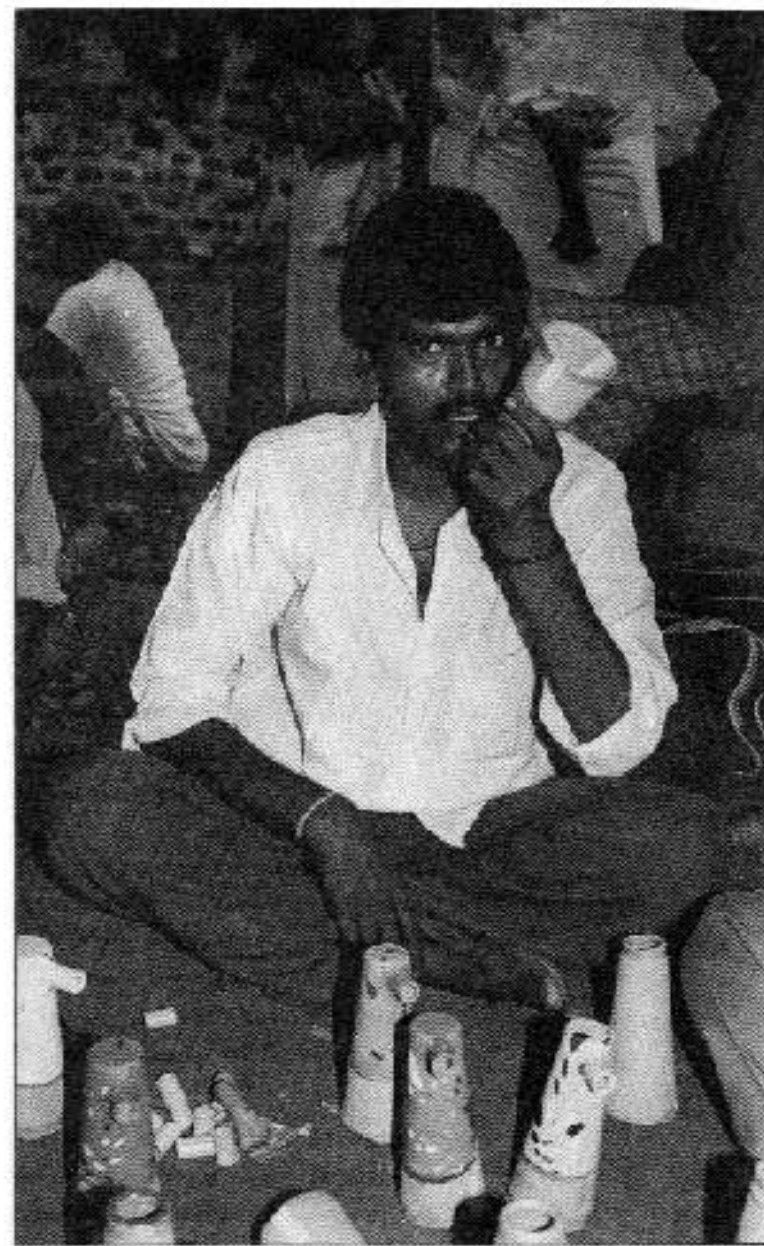
Sitaram with the 'premi-swaabhai'



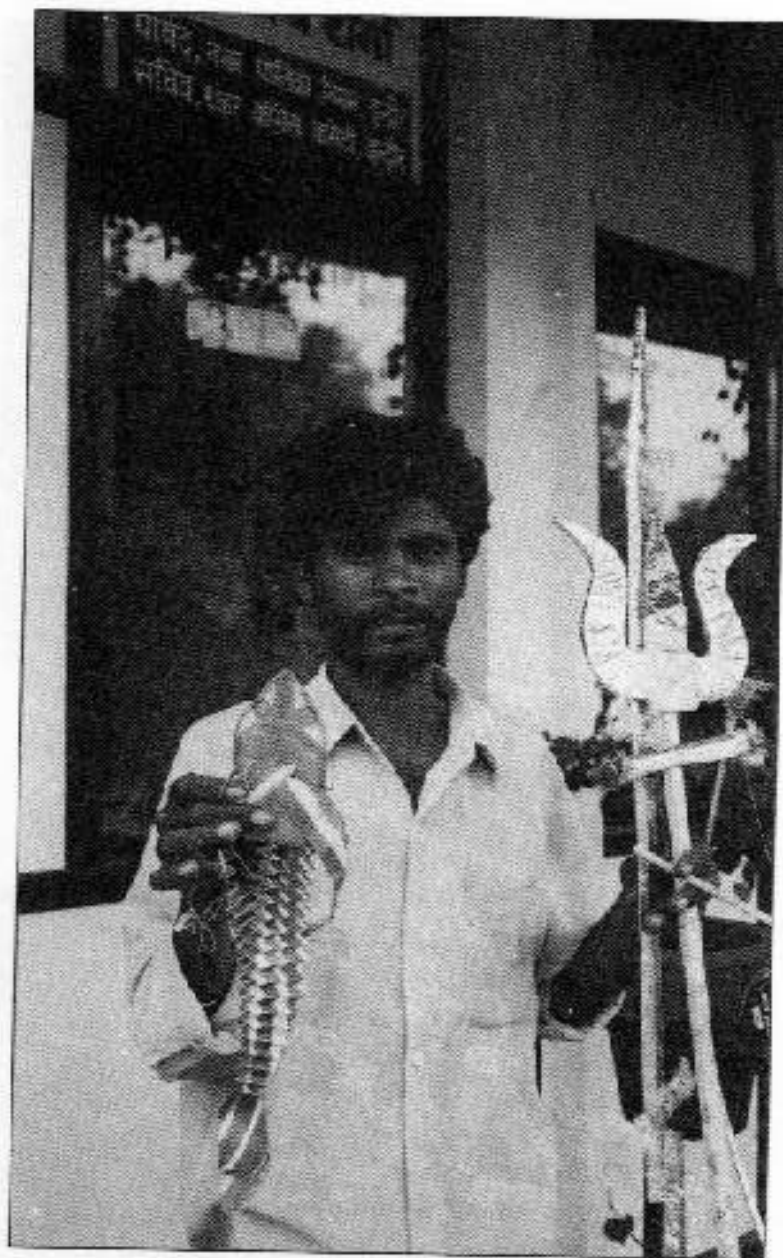
Windmills like paper filigree



Dalchand leaving home to sell toys on Agra streets



Kripal Sarini with his 'bhonpu'



Kalu

A Different Calendar

*Jab mele lagte hain, tab nikal jate hain, jab barish hoti hai, to kailhna
padhte hai.*

*(When the fairs start, we begin moving out to sell; when it rains, we
have to stay put.)*

Sitaram Raghuvanshi, toymaker, Agra.

Dhupkale mein yeh khilone bana lete hain. Thand ke din mein
gas balloon bechte hain. Barish ke din kuch dusra kam kar lete—
auto, geeto chala lete.

*(In the hot months we make these toys. In the winter, we sell gas
balloons. In the rainy season, we have to find some other work,
maybe drive an auto or something.)*

Rakesh, son of Suresh, toymaker, Hyderabad.

It is not as if the mela, or the Great Indian Fair, has become
completely invisible in our cities. Every so often, we stumble upon
this congregation of pleasure-seekers, spilling over with noise
and colour, and curse softly under our breath for getting caught
up in the traffic snarls it causes on our busy city roads. There are
enough occasions for melas to erupt—they have a cyclical,
predictable occurrence, but as city dwelling sophisticates we can
be forgiven for forgetting that the annual Shravan or Baisakhi
mela is due to happen in our neighbourhood, until stalls appear.

roads become crowded, and the event becomes an inescapable reality.

For the toymaker, a mela is as important for survival as a computer keyboard and screen are for today's writer. The fair provides the canvas for his most inspired efforts, it gives him the opportunity to meet directly with an appreciative clientele that has come looking for objects of amusement and wonder—his particular speciality. Although a committed toymaker makes toys all year round, and sells them at his own chosen spots in the city, there is a special satisfaction to be had in making toys for sale to great numbers of excited children and their temporarily indulgent parents.

It is at melas too, that he receives the spark that could one day turn him into a potential entrepreneur-artist-salesman. Kripal Saini, mentioned in the previous chapter, was a young man working in a factory in Meerut that made shuttlecocks. The pay, Rs 1,500, was not enough for the most basic things, and since he had got married he worried all the time about how he would make ends meet. Then he went to a mela in Aligarh, where he saw a man selling balloon and cardboard cone trumpets which had a fearsome sound. Not only did Kripal buy several trumpets, he was sufficiently intrigued to take the objects home and figure out how they were made. The design of the trumpets was not the only thing that appealed to him; he was also seduced by the unfettered, cheerful look of the trumpet seller, surrounded by an avid group of child customers. This seemed a better route to popularity and relative prosperity than the one Kripal then travelled. After all, although he made an item for use in sports, no personal credit was to be derived from this—he was just one more cog in a factory. It was at the Aligarh mela that Kripal Saini decided to step out of the dubious security of a Rs 1,500 job for the high-risk-more gain-popularity profile of an independent toymaker.

Now he sells the trumpets for Rs 5 or Rs 3 a piece, depending on the neighbourhood and the kind of mela where he is selling. As he says, 'Taj Mahal Utsav mein to maine ise dus rupaye mein bhi becha' (At the Taj Mahal Utsav, I could even sell the trumpet for Rs 10). He has tried selling to wholesalers but the profits are much reduced, and it is not worth the effort. Instead, Kripal buys cardboard cones by weight from Meerut mills, balloons, tape and string locally from wherever a fair is, travels by bus and makes a living selling at different fairs, while his family—a wife and three children—stay in Meerut. In between trips, the family help him make stock, and some of his skills are already passed on to them. His regular beat is Aligarh, Etawah, Agra, and the March mela at Dehradun. Although he visits Delhi to buy materials from Sadar Bazar, he does not sell on Delhi streets.

Kripal's life, like the lives of many toymakers all over the country, is determined by a calendar that has more to do with seasons, than with individual dates. It moves in tune with festivals and celebratory gatherings—those outbursts of gaiety and revelry, where a trumpet would be very much an asset. By its very nature of being tied up to the occasions of community celebration, toymaking is an occupation that reminds us of an 'Indianness' we have always possessed, whether our rulers were Moghul or British, or our dominant religion was Buddhist or Jain. The sound of vendors selling virtually everything, the display of acrobats, dancers and other performers, the crowds who gather near a temple or a dargah, but actually come just to have a good time, all these have been a part of our ancestors' lives, and their ancestors' before that.

Although many of the festivals and seasonal melas toymakers attend revolve around religious occasions, it would be wrong to ascribe a religious sentiment to the toymaker's presence. A toymaker is a professional, and his professionalism is nowhere more evident than in his being truly secular, with an equal respect for all religions, forms of worship and its followers. For toymaker

Salim of Jaipur, the tremendous mela activity around Gangaur, is occasion to take his black, accordion pleated paper alligator to many towns in Rajasthan. For toymaker Anthony in Chennai, the annual chariot festival at the Kapaleeswara temple in Mylapore is an important day he keeps track of, even though it falls on a different date each year. For toymaker Sitaram of Agra, the mela around Habbu Lala's dargah is as important as the Janmashtami fair at Namner.

By closely following the seasonal pattern of people's lives with his own efforts, the toymaker stays committed to a concept of time different from the fragmented, impersonal view of the third millennial city dweller. In the early part of the 20th century, George Orwell had spoken of the changed nature of time for the modern man, for whom a moment, say '6:17 am', the time of his morning train to work, acquires more significance than a season, or a festival, or any of the other times that were considered significant in earlier times. To a greater or lesser degree, most of us in the cities have become cut off from the great, sweeping movements of time, as we struggle to stay focused on the present, on those issues that hold most urgency in the here and now.

And yet, the planets move, the seasons change, and days come around surcharged once again with the message of harvest and rejoicing, or sombre commemoration—the festivals, fasting and prayer, ritual and regenerative worship being our only link with the greater meaning of Time, as distinct from our personal, petty concerns. U R Ananthamurthy, in speaking of present day Indians losing contact with our own people, the opportunity to learn several languages, and retain our cultural diversity, mentions the importance of this concept of time. 'The educated Indians have lost contact with the almanac (panchanga) and know nothing about festivals or auspicious days, but in villages people know about the jatre (local festivities) even though they are illiterate.'¹

The toymaker is inviting us to stay more closely aware of the desi almanac, so we can reap the rewards of its most significant occasions. Whether we use the mela as a time to ride the giant wheel, eat cotton candy, or get our hands painted with instant mehndi, we will be the richer for it, less wrapped up in our own pursuits. As a Chennaiite, it should be quite natural for me to remember that March brings the Kapaleeswara chariot festival and end-August early September the vizha at Velankanni Church. By visiting the neighbourhood fair and buying the toymaker's wares, you are not only handing out a few rupees to an artisan in need, you are also honouring a concept of time that takes you away from the mundane and the momentary to the abiding and the absolute.

At one level, the toymaker's reliance on the almanac makes him a link with our past, when such an almanac had more hold over our people. At another level, through the objects he creates, the toymaker enters that realm of timelessness that is usually reserved for art. When we gaze upon a pull-along drum made by stretching a skin, or brown paper over a round frame, and played by two sticks that move with the wheels of the toy, we can not say for sure when this marvel was first conceived or by whom. All that is immediately obvious is that the creative impulse that lies behind it, lives now, as it did many aeons ago. Toymaking with one's hands is part of the manifestations of that creative act, that 'will forever elude human understanding,' which can be 'obscurely sensed, but never wholly grasped.'² Thus J Swaminathan quotes C G Jung in his discussion of the timelessness of art. What he says further is more revealing from our point of view.

'The very notion of time, however, implies a sequence, a progression: for, if we are aware of the artistic achievements of the great civilisations of the past or of pre-historic and primitive man, they in their turn were not aware of what we know because of their isolation, both in time and space. Historically speaking, it would seem therefore, that though we may read the past, we cannot anticipate the future. Is it in this sense that there is an

irreversible progression in time? In the alphabetical chain of events, the letter 'B' contains 'A', 'C' contains 'A' and 'B' and 'D' contains 'A', 'B', and 'C' and so on. In art however, the 'past' lives with us as other presences, it 'vanquishes time'. Time is denuded of its progressional ballast: it goes haywire.'

When we receive a toy from a mela toymaker we can recognise in the object something of what has always existed—before the categories of history, geography and culture came along to add weight to the artefact. In essence, a mela toymaker's toy reminds us that it is human to want to play, to create objects that facilitate play, to bring together diverse materials and observe the results of this, to merely 'bring into being'. It is in this sense that these people will always stay special to me, surrounded as they are by others peddling underwear and steel vessels. In his own way, the toymaker gives us a glimpse of the absolute, even while firmly enchained, like all of us, in the coils of temporality.

Every toymaker I spoke to had important dates and fairs to attend at places outside the town where they lived. But nowhere did I get a better description of an itinerant toymaker's calendar, than from a young lad from Bihar whom I met at the Mahakumbh Mela in Allahabad in January 2001. He described the village from which he hailed in Sahibganj district, as having at least 100 toymakers, who assembled toys from materials they picked up from the wholesale market in Calcutta. He was selling a parrot on a rubber string, and a small plastic dog that is cunningly moved by blowing air under its stomach when you press a small bellows in your hand. From this street seller, who had completed high school, I learnt that for many in his village, Sivaratri was spent at the Deoria mela, during Magh, or end January early February, in the Magh Mela at Allahabad. Every twelve years it becomes the Mahakumbh. Raksha Bandhan and the month of Shravan took him to Siwan, where a huge fair was held then, and he also attended the Rath Yatra at Puri. For Dussehra, he was in Patna, and at Diwali he was in Katihar, near Barauni. In between these trips, he returned to his village in Sahibganj to get stock ready,

and made some forays to Jamnagar to cash in on the regular, urban clients.

Before I began my work with toymakers, I had a hard time remembering all the Indian calendar months, but dozens of conversations about the 'Mankali ka mela' or the 'Ganesh Chaturthi ki jhankiyan' or the 'Navratri' and 'Dussehra' fairs had their effect. I began to have a different map in my mind of regions that I travelled. I found myself visualising the seasonal movement of people for a neighbourhood mela or a grander, district or city fair. The movement of the moon, as reflected in 'purnima' or 'amavasya' or 'ekadasi' began to have an importance for me, and I was made aware of the 'Chait Navadurga', a nine-day period of devotion to Devi, which falls in the hot month of March-April, and is distinct from the later 'Navratri' celebrated with such gusto in Gujarat, and as 'Durga Puja' in Bengal.

I landed in Varanasi on the very first day of 'Chait Navadurga', and after my mission had been explained to them, my panda escorts took me to a dusty, diesel-stained suburb of Benares called 'Gol Gadda'. The place crawls with lorries and buses leaving or arriving but the reason we were there was to check out the mela around the Shail Putri temple, which is situated across a large maidan from the main road. The path that people were using to walk across the maidan from the road was lined with small vendors and mela specialists. Bangles, instant mehndi, bags, belts, pictures of gods and goddesses, everything was in evidence. As we reached the other side of the maidan and the road forward became the narrow gully that would take us to the temple in a residential area, the density of people, objects and animals, increased. I could feel the combined thrill of being both observer and participant.

The sight of many colourful paper windmills, held aloft on a tall pole lined with straw, in which the sticks of the windmills had been tucked, was proof that our efforts had not been in vain. A boy of about seventeen, of medium height and with eyes deeply

lined with kohl, was selling the windmills. Enquiries revealed that his name was Banarasi, and his father made the windmills and the rattle sold alongside. Banarasi had a lisp that made it difficult to understand what he said, but the directions he gave Anil and Rajkumar Pande were sufficient to give them an idea of where he lived. What I later learnt, was quite surprising. This none-too-bright lad with a speech impediment was a more successful salesman than his brother Gulab, whom we met in the next few days.

I learnt that the Chait Navadurga period was marked by a fair at a different Devi temple every day. Varanasi has no shortage of temples, and the next day it was to be at the Brahmacharini Devi temple in the city. Accordingly, we made our way there the next day, through endless narrow lanes of the Badi Piyari area, made slippery with Ganga water and cowdung in equal quantities. But the enthusiasm at this venue was not as marked—only a few intrepid sellers had set up shop along the sides of the narrow lanes, and they had few customers too. Although many people were heading towards the temple, especially groups of women with saris pulled over their heads, some with children poised on their hips, there didn't seem to be that massive, shifting, intent-on-pleasure influx, that marks the true mela. We emerged out of some more narrow lanes into the crowded area of Chowk—no toymakers today.

The most exuberant, densely crowded mela I attended in the whole Chait Navadurga period was in the hamlet of Agalpura, a bumpy, forty-minute bus ride out of Varanasi. This is where the temple of Shitala Devi stands on the bank of the Ganga, and draws pilgrims all year round to bathe on the nearby ghats and visit the temple for darshan. My escorts and I reached the spot by walking along a long wall lining one of the canals from the Ganga. The sun blazed overhead, the ground was hot beneath our feet, but this did not seem to deter the hundreds of other visitors arrived, like us, from another village or town just for the mela.

The level ground next to the temple had been covered by an immense shamiana (tent-like covering), under which small stalls selling puja materials or food had been set up. There were also many people changing into dry clothes after their Ganga dip and milling currents of people were moving towards the temple or away from it. There were steep steps leading down to the river from this sheltered clearing. I went down the slippery steps to wash hands, face and feet, but my thoughts were dominated by the recurring announcements on the public address system, which went something like this: 'Ek ladki, kareeb ek ya dedh saal ki, badami rang ka frock pehne hue, Control Room mein layi gayi hai. Uski ma use jaldi aakar le le, kyunki voh bahut adhik ro rahi hai.' (A girl, aged one or one and a half, wearing a beige coloured frock, has been brought to the Control Room. Her mother may please collect her soon; she is crying rather a lot.)

I was torn between amusement and concern at the thought of the bawling child in the Control Room, and her frantic mother, whose attention must have wandered for an instant in that teeming crowd. A few moments later, the voice over the public address system continued, 'Uske pair mein chandi ka challa hai, uske haathon mein ek chandi, ek lohe aur ek tambe ka kada hai. Uska mundan ho chuka hai.' (She is wearing silver payals, she has a silver, an iron and a copper bangle on her wrists. Her head has recently been shaved.) This last detail was repeated several times. Now I was growing more concerned, imagining a small, vulnerable, bald little girl crying her heart out next to uniformed policemen.

But I was only showing my own novitiate status vis-à-vis 'melas'. Anil and Rajkumar Pande helped me make my way into the temple for an incredibly jostled, utterly fleeting glimpse at Shitala Ma's serene face. Then I was out in the open again, and the announcement over the loudspeaker now went, 'Jo ladki abhi abhi yahan ro rahi thi, uski Ma use pehchan kar le gayi hain. Naam, Basanti, Gaon M— —, Jilla, Bhadohi.' (The girl who was crying here just a few minutes ago has been identified and

collected by her mother. Mother's name—Basanti, Village M—, District, Bhadohi). This last was presumably being added to enable people who knew the girl's mother to offer their congratulations.

Heady from the satisfactory reunion of the girl and her mother, I looked with happy and indulgent eyes at the crowds of arrivals and departures. I was almost immediately rewarded with the sight of Samarooh, one of the more colourful and highly individual toymakers I met. Samarooh stood selling rustic looking birds and dolls made out of cloth and paper stuffed with straw and wood shavings. These dangled on rubber strings from his straw covered toyseller's pole held balanced on one shoulder. There were also red plastic paper goggles, incredibly, exactly the same as I remembered from my own childhood. These had to be slipped over one's head and were held in place by a rubber band that made a deep indentation in one's head after some minutes of wearing.

Samarooh was dressed in an assemblage of varied attire. A lungi, with a coloured kurta, a jacket, a colourful scarf knotted on his head—all these gave him a dashing sartorial air in the Agalpura setting. He had intense, intelligent eyes, and listened carefully when I told him about my desire to meet and study toymakers like him. While we spoke, a crowd was pushing and jostling against us, and many of these people wanted to buy his toys. I apologised for distracting him, and bought a quantity of toys to make up for my disturbance. Samarooh graciously agreed to come to a relatively quiet village lane nearby to be photographed while a small boy who was assisting him, continued to make sales. While we talked, little village children kept coming up to us and Samarooh would hand out pairs of goggles to them. Even though the goggles cost only Re 1, I could not help remonstrating with him about such free distribution. But Samarooh put this down to affection—the affection he felt was inevitable for the children of the village where he came every few months to sell, and where they had

become his friends. This prem bhasha or the language of love was something I began hearing only then, but which came up again and again in the context of the toymakers.

I spoke to Samarooh and asked him to come to Varanasi a few days later for a more detailed talk. I had also arranged to meet Banarasi, Gulab, their father, and Arun Jaiswal, another toymaker, on the same day so that we could take some pictures, and the occasion could also be one for them all to meet one another. Samarooh demurred—I could see that the thought of missing Navadurga sales for the sake of an earnest but unknown city madam was not attractive to him. I did my best to persuade him, promising him that I would compensate any loss he suffered as a result of not being able to sell on that day. He then agreed, and we settled on the time and place to meet. When I was leaving, I could not help asking him one more time, anxiously, that he would turn up, wouldn't he? He trained his intense brown eyes on me, and said with great dignity, 'Ek bar zaban de diya to aaoonga zaroor.' (Once I have given my word, I will definitely arrive). I was reassured, and also impressed by his trademark style of dialogue delivery—the deliberate and emphatic way he spoke. I left for Varanasi, very charmed by this modern day Pied Piper.

On the appointed day, Anil and Rajkumar Pande, myself, our photographer Dilip Rupani and the other toymakers all waited. We had tea, and did some interviews amongst ourselves, all the while hoping for a glimpse of Samarooh on the Varanasi city streets.

But this was one encounter that would not be repeated.

* * *

The lads at the Mahakumbh Mela had a way of melting away as soon as I expressed a desire to talk to them. They stood, captive for a few moments while I bought a toy or two, then vanished quite dramatically when I wanted to prolong the encounter.

I was baffled. Why did I seem such a threat? Did I look like a policewoman? Why did my girth, my maternal approach, my sincerity not have its normal effect?

Then someone told me, 'Oh don't expect them to talk to you—they are all from Bihar.'

I spent days thinking about the implications of this casual statement.

These young men always on the move...where are they headed? What is it they are leaving behind?

A Great Way From Home

Hamara thikana kyon nahin hai? Kyonki hamko lipi nahin hai, guru nahin hai.

(Why don't we have a fixed address? Because we don't have a script, or a teacher.)

Babu Kale, gypsy toymaker from Gulbarga, to author in Hyderabad.

Appa Delhiil irundhu vandachu. Enakku Delhi poravazhiye theriyaadhu.

(My father came to Chennai from Delhi. I don't even know the way to go there.)

Tamanna, maker of one-stringed toy violins, to author in Chennai.

It is impossible to live in an Indian city, or take a train ride on any division of the Indian Railways, without meeting masses of displaced people. At railway platforms, the huddled figures sleeping under scraps of gunny sack even in winter, could be lost children, running away from unbearable conditions at home only to find worse horrors in the world outside. Or they could be construction workers and labourers, who do not own a single thing in the world other than the ability to use their physical strength to earn a few rupees—as long as this strength remains. The displaced can approach us in any guise, as sweepers, tea

sellers, taxi drivers, rickshawmen, even beggars, or more distressingly, mentally unstable loners with tattered clothing and matted hair. If we live in any modern metro, the presence of such people, obviously far from the places where they began life and grew up, is part of the urban landscape.

The factors that drive any of these people to travel miles away from home, have all been discussed at various levels, and at different times. The 'pull' factor of cities in a developing country, and the 'push' factor of rural areas, have been well documented and become terms of everyday usage. Uneven development, their environment's inability to sustain them, the sheer survival instinct that drives them to search for a better future, all these are behind the movement of people. What should matter to us is what level of comfort they are able to achieve after they have abandoned the relative security and stability of their homes. Are they able to achieve anything near a full human existence that provides dignity and self-respect apart from just the bare necessities of food and shelter? Even while the question is being asked, the answer is already rising before our eyes. For every city-dweller must pass hundreds of acres of abject dwellings—alongside rail tracks, or next to flyovers and slick city roads—on his or her way to work.

'For the poor, the quality of life in both the cities and the villages is virtually the same, the same shortage of living space, the same insanitation, the same phenomena of people without clean water supply and sewage facilities. A sizeable portion of the migrants to the cities merely exchange urban for rural misery.'¹ Jagmohan describes the plight of rural migrants forming the bulk of the 'informal sector' in our cities. In a stringently worded series of lectures that draw on his experience as an administrator in Planning, he points out that criminality in terms of encroachment of land and violation of municipal laws is rarely punished when the violators have the money and clout to circumvent laws. He calls this whole phenomenon 'Urban Indiscipline'. By contrast, we can see everyday the heavy hand with which the law comes

down on the dispossessed. One of my most vivid memories of 1983 Mumbai is *bhel-puri* ingredients scattered all over the pavement in front of me. A thin, middle aged man from U.P, who carried a basket on his head till he could prop it over a portable cane stand and set up a snack stall, had just had an encounter with a policeman.

'How is it that not even a single city of the developing countries has been able to solve, or even to contain, the problems of its slums and squatters, of its land and housing, of its transport and social services? And why are the conditions deteriorating?'² asks Jagmohan. He then gives the reply, 'The answer to all such questions is that the city of the developing world is still in the grip of the same forces which made one part of the world rich and the other poor, which concentrated the ability to exploit and manipulate all resources in one section of the international community and deprive the other of the same.' Jagmohan is right in identifying the continuing death dance of poverty and misery in developing countries as the inevitable side effects of unfettered capitalism. He is right in perceiving the global roots of exploitation, and its preservation and protection by local elites.

But what holds me fast in his utterances is not the left wing ideology that seems to be underlying them. What grips me is the following: 'A great society alone can give birth to great cities. After all, the city is the spiritual workshop of the nation. On its landscape are imprinted the inner beauty and the inner compassion as well as the inner ugliness and the inner brutality of the society.'³ I fear that the repeated stating of the problems of the poor in terms of system analysis, or inevitable economic processes, distances us from any personal connection to these problems. The condition of so many fellow humans ceases to disturb us if we use the convenient yardsticks of newspaper headlines, published statistics and political statements to interpret it for us. Available facts about poverty and suffering become a convenient screen, somewhat like mosquito netting, which protect us from the sharp bites of the real problem.

If a city is truly to be a 'spiritual workshop' that helps define our identity and buttresses the notion of us being a great nation, rather than just a country with divided citizens, then we will have to perceive our relationship with the poor in more direct terms. The displaced will have to come to us, not through the convenient packaging of received wisdom from the media, or social theorists, or leaders' statements—they will have to appear to us as they in fact do—rubbing shoulders with us on the urban canvas. We have to perceive this shoulder rubbing as a series of opportunities to do what we can do in our own lives to make the burden easier to bear for one, or two, or three people. And we will have to persist with the pursuit of these opportunities, in spite of the inevitable disappointments and betrayals, for these are built into any attempt to help another human being, and why should the poor be any saintlier than the better off?

Even the most blessedly sanguine Indian would admit today that our cities reflect more the 'inner ugliness' and 'inner brutality' of our society than the inner beauty we know we possess. The idea of the great city and the great nation put pressure on each one of us to be greater than what we presently are. Perhaps India stays behind because we find it easier to be kind to privileged visitors—atithis—to our land, than to the people who share the land with us. If we still want to believe in a nation in the future, it is time we became accountable in a very immediate and personal sense.

Many of the toymakers I met were displaced individuals whom I found far from the places where they came from. Some of these were second-generation inhabitants of the new place or city where I met them. Thirty-year-old Tamanna is the son of Parvati, who still sells one-stringed violins at Chennai temple fairs. His father, Kashiram, maker of these violins, came from Delhi almost 70 years ago, and lived and died here. Tamanna and his elder brother Charandas, also a toy violin maker, have been born in Tamil Nadu and speak Tamil, with very little Hindi remembered between the two of them. Tamanna has travelled the Tamil temple fair circuit very thoroughly. He has been to Trichy for Vaikunta Ekadasi at

Srirangam, to Thiruvannamalai for Karthik Deepam, to Madurai and Coimbatore. The annual melas at Mylapore and Triplicane are important to him. He has married a Tamil girl and his children naturally speak Tamil. They have no exposure to their grandfather's Hindi-speaking roots.

Toymaker Anthony is also a second-generation Chennaite, whose father came from Kerala, selling toys. He still makes the creeping alligator/fish/snake that is such a classic street toy. Made from the pages of accounts registers, and coloured with the pinks, greens and yellows that are typical of the older toys, this 'item' still draws child customers in today's sophisticated times. He stays in Pallavaram, a Chennai suburb, and sells in city areas. His house has electricity and a fan. 'Nothing else,' he says.

Anjali is a 15-year-old maker of whirring frog rattles. These are coloured clay cups covered with paper, which rotate around a stick on a string, making the noise a frog makes in a monsoon puddle. Anjali brings me these toys wound together in bunches, which makes them seem like some delicious fruit coloured pink and red, yellow, blue and green. Among my subjects for this book, Anjali probably ranks among the lowliest in terms of wealth and status—she lived under a plastic sheet stretched out against a wall alongside the railway track close to Gummidipoondi railway station. She has since moved away, but to similar settings. I am more vulnerable to this child than any other toymaker, since she lives in my city and knows my address. Regular consignments of rattles are a result of her having this information, and these particular toys do not take well to storage.

The sticks of the rattles are what Anjali and her friends have collected just by rooting about among the railway side bushes. They often come infested with a wood boring insect that makes them crumble to dust in a few weeks. The first time I noticed this, I was stumped, but subsequently, I have found a way to beat the expiry date on the rattles. There is a school for children from the fisherfolk colony quite close to my home. The sweetest use of

all, for Anjali's rattles, is to stand at a street corner and give them away—to children coming chattering and chirping out of the school gates.

Anjali comes from a community in Andhra Pradesh which was skilled in breaking rock and making the hundreds of tiny indentations in it which are necessary if rock is to be used to grind substances. Ten or twelve years ago in Chennai, the cry of such people offering to mend grinding stones was heard even in upmarket neighbourhoods. I remember writing an article in *The Hindu* wondering about the future of repairers and restorers in an increasingly use-and-throw age. Making small holes in rock seemed an immensely threatened occupation to me in an age when everyone was switching to food processors and mixer-grinders. What would happen to these people and their skills, I had asked? Were they doomed to join the shifting mass of dusty-haired labourers constructing the gleaming new buildings of the city?

When I met Anjali in 2001 and she told me about her rock-breaking origins, I felt the spark of recognition—these were people I had thought about before. That some of them had turned to making toys was heartening, I felt. It meant that the skills they remembered from a rural life could still be used to eke out an independent existence in the city. But this was probably the last positive speck I could glean from the whole meeting. Anjali told me the names of her family members proudly, 'Rangappa, Shekamma, Balappa...' She has two elder brothers, and four elder sisters, but the family is scattered. It is not clear how many are in Chennai and how many at her village near Tirupati, on the way to Guntakal.

This child learnt not only to speak Tamil after coming to Chennai but also to carry her sari-clad diminutive frame in local trains and buses, weighed down with its bag of rattles, and sell her toys at 'Konneru, Mahabalipuram, Arakkonam, Central Station, Tambaram...' Apart from the toys, her family

also sells gods' photos, bought cheaply at Vijayawada where they are printed and framed. Being on one's own is fraught with risk, admits Anjali, who is scared of the 'porukki' (loutish) boys who circle the place where she lives, surrounded by other people similarly placed. Her dream is to one day stay in a house and not have to listen to comments and abuse from passersby and strangers.

When Anjali sings, her song is about a village goddess, and her voice is the sweet, untutored lilt of the true rustic.

Tholichamma, Tholichamma,

Varalaksha manna garu,

(Patta cheerale pompinamma senchuvaraki...)

Every action of Anjali's proclaims her intelligence. The way she has adapted to life in a big city that is so different from the village she comes from, clings on to a dignified existence without the least help from any authority or organisation is remarkable by any standards. But she and many millions like her are not winning any bravery medals.

Songs are the most obvious symbols of the displacement of rural people. Long after they have left their roots, the songs live on, embedded in the psyche, to erupt even when a strange madam asks them to sing. The gypsy sellers of martial toys—gleaming swords, bows and arrows, and the mace, or gada (which is actually a plastic ball covered with gold paper, with a long stick coming out as a handle), also sang for me.

To meet these itinerant toy makers from Gulbarga, who are called boriyabatwallas by local Hyderabad street vendors, (since they have no address, and always carry their belongings with them) I had to go to a bus stop next to the Paradise talkies flyover in Hyderabad. Small infants lay sleeping in the dust of the pavement. The bus shelter was no longer used—the flyover had made the road in front of it a steady stream of swift moving traffic. The only use for the bus shelter roof was to provide some shade for

these nomadic toysellers, who travel everywhere with all their belongings—a bundle of clothes, another of vessels.

Women with large sindoor bindis, brown eyes, and tobacco blackened teeth came forward to talk to me. One said she was Shanta, another Shethani. The language they spoke among themselves seemed a mixture of Gujarati and Marathi, with a little bit of Kannada thrown in. To me, they were able to express themselves in Hindi. The women were keen to talk, but a man in the background grew increasingly agitated till he too was allowed to have his say. This was Babu Kale, their elder, who told me they were from a community classified as ST, and known as 'Pardi' or 'Adichanchal' in Kannada.

Before they became toymakers, they used to hunt, like the Narikurava tribals we meet in Chennai. But Kale said the community earned a bad name over the years because of 'some thieving, quarrelsome members who fought with the police'. They have been coming to sell toys in Hyderabad for the last ten years, going back to their village in Gulbarga district every few months. They are at pains to inform me that they are respectable people, with a little land and a house in the village. But when asked why they chose to live like this, with no address in the city and no hope of schooling the children, they say they are quite used to a nomadic existence.

Babu Kale's own personal ties with Hyderabad are quite old. His mother first came to Hyderabad as a labourer for the Nizam's dams built with brick and mortar. He has studied up to Std. VII, and says they teach the toymaking craft to community children when they are older. When a song is requested, Kale urges the women to sing about their community deity. 'Apra dev nu namaskar karo' (Pray to our God), he orders them.

The resultant track on tape has the power to startle the most hardened fan of rock, to move the most blasé urbanite. As the cadence of the women's voices rises and falls in praise of a Devi in their native Gulbarga, the goosepimples form naturally along

my arms and down my spine. The roar of city traffic on the flyover, the dusty surroundings, have all faded away. This is just the women and their goddess, caught together forever in a communication that transcends time, space and circumstance.

Dipen Das makes the most delicate paper windmills out of tissue paper and thin strips of bamboo bark. The white paper is coloured in blue, pink and orange stripes that he applies himself. He sells these in the city areas of Jaipur, and this is where I met him, outside a temple one October evening. The man whom I had first spotted holding the windmills on the straw covered tall wooden pole, turned out to be Dipen's paid assistant who knew no Hindi at all. Struggling to converse with him, I was relieved to meet the windmill maker standing a few yards away. Dipen is from West Bengal, but his Hindi was sufficient to tell me what I needed to know.

Dipen learnt to make toys from his father, who used to be a regular toy seller at fairs around his village in Murshidabad district. His father made toy birds, rattles, snakes and windmills. Dipen does not know how to make all of them, but the windmill is a popular item that has round the year sales, so he has stuck to that. When I met 30-year-old Dipen, he had been in Jaipur for a mere two months, but had established the places in the city where he could sell his toys. 'Jahan seth-seth aadmi aata hai' (Wherever the more prosperous people come), he told me candidly. However, there were other areas of his life about which he was less candid. That evening, he told me he had arrived from Bengal with his wife, his elderly mother, and a child, a son. But when I went to his house two days later, I met his family—three daughters, a son, his wife and his mother. Why had he lied to me, I asked him. Because he felt shy owning up to so many children, he said.

Before heading to Rajasthan, Dipen had been making toys and selling them at fairs in several places. He remembers these as Dhakuriya, Ballygunge, Ranchi and Ballia. Dipen felt emboldened to come to Jaipur because an elder cousin had been making a

living driving a rickshaw here and told him the place was good to live. In fact, Dipen's locality is very much like all the toymaker homes I have visited. Narrow streets deep in the heart of the town, the neighbourhood noisy and full of people, drainwater running alongside the road, curious children skipping along all around me wherever I went. The man who assists Dipen in selling the windmills also drives a rickshaw in the day. For his evening's assistance, Dipen gives him Rs 50.

About his plight in being so far from home, in a city where his mother and wife have to keep company only with each other and the kids, since few outside speak anything other than Hindi, Dipen admitted to a certain nervousness. 'Pardesi aadmi hai, dor lagta hai' (I'm a stranger, and it does feel scary), he says. When I remarked that he has, in fact, shown great courage in moving so far away from the safe and familiar with only his West Bengal voters' identity card for company, he says, 'Himmat to hai' (Yes, I do have the courage).

It was hard not to become enmeshed in Dipen's worries. My daughter accompanied me to his home and what she found most touching was the way every single thing given to the children was shared and eaten by them. His eldest daughter, all of seven or eight, broke biscuits tenderly into smaller pieces for the infant boy. She could bend the tissue paper around the thin bamboo frame and even stick it into place with tiny fingers. She had a plastic hair band and bangles on her wrists, but we had a hard time figuring out that she had two sisters. All the children wore only chaddis and the girls had been given short haircuts, presumably in the cause of neatness.

Will Dipen's children be able to find a way to school in Jaipur? Will his flight from rural Murshidabad be of help to his family? Every interaction with toymakers on a personal level always leaves me with such residual questions that, like all queries about the future, have no clear cut answers. But it is extremely sad that after so many years as an independent democracy, such questions

do not produce any definable attempts at solving the issues that lie behind the questions. Rural to urban migration is discussed, its causes and effects dissected. But the needs in human terms for such migrants are nobody's problem or responsibility. Can migrants be helped to cross the language barrier? Is there a need for 'transit education' for children whose parents have come from far away? Can States facilitate each other in dealing with the migrant population from their respective districts? One look at any crowded railway station or inter-State bus terminal in our metro cities should convince us that initiatives that bring solutions in these areas are necessary, and long overdue.

The plight of migrant toymakers like Anjali, the Gulbarga community and Dipen Das may evoke compassion—they are certainly in need of help. But in their own way, these individuals, who have received nothing from the Indian State in terms of welfare or incentives, rewards or recognition, are doing their best to strengthen the concept of India as a nation. If it is possible for large numbers of our people to move to another area of their choice, anywhere in the country, and earn a decent living, then India is truly a robust democracy made up of free and fearless citizens. But if, as has been demonstrated recently in Gujarat, people's freedom to practise their trade and vocation has been curtailed by a hostile host community that demands proof of being Hindu, India cannot be said to be a free, democratic nation any more.

Consider this: what if Dipen had been stopped in his tracks for not having been born in Rajasthan, or Anjali picked up by a Tamil corporation van for not meeting Tamil Nadu health and hygiene standards, or the Gulbarga toymakers threatened with extinction unless they decided which language they wanted to speak—Gujarati, Kannada, or Rashtra Bhasha Hindi? Would this nightmarish vision of India be fit even for us—the empowered, educated elite—to live in? Because people like Anjali and Dipen dare to break regional and language boundaries, they show us that 'India as we know it' still exists. The creative toymaker is not

only an artist-entrepreneur, he or she represents a political identity that we must fight to preserve at all costs.

There is thus no shame at all attached to joining a march through your city asking for protection of vendors/squatters/slum dwellers/migrants' rights. The protection we seek is for ourselves, and our children. Let them know India, as we have done.

* * *

Our auto is moving away from Jaipur museum, and a beggar peers in. Leprosy has wiped away the features of his face, and reduced his right hand to a knobbled stump. But the teeth still gleam white in his dark face. As he salutes me with his good hand, I remark to my daughter that he looks like a Tamilian. I am fumbling in my bag for an appropriate coin.

He catches my remark. 'Yes, yes,' he says in English, then pats his chest and says, 'Tamil'. My guess has been a lucky one.

'So which town are you from?' I ask in Tamil. And he says, 'Villupuram', which is a few hours' drive from where I live in Chennai. I abandon the coin and produce a note instead. It seems rude to offer anything less, to someone so stricken, and so far from home. He rewards me with a smile full of gleaming teeth, and a wave.

This India, this all-encompassing place, how many types of humans does she hold in her capacious breast?

Their Own Masters

Yeh apne marji ka kaam hai. Aur koi upar se dant dakhla dene wala nahin hai.

(We do this work out of choice. And there is no one above us to scold or interfere.)

Chandrakala, wife of toymaker Suresh of Hyderabad.

Naukri se achcha yeh kaam hi hai.

(This work is better than working at a job.)

Subhash Kumar, toymaker, Chandigarh

Surrounded by grinding poverty and socially handicapped through a lack of recognised skills, the toymaker exercises a personal choice to achieve a reasonably dignified existence. By doing this, the individual distinguishes himself or herself from the variegated mass. It is as if the toymaker, by selling his unique and highly coloured toys in the grey urban environs, is pushing himself onto our imagination, fighting his or her way into our thoughts, there to speak for all the self-employed urban poor. 'Look, I may live in a hut with electricity and fan and nothing else,' Anthony seems to be saying, 'But I can still make these intricate contraptions using my hands that will amuse you if you let them. If you give me the help and encouragement I need to lead a productive life, I could work to bring rewards for both of us.'

Recognising creativity in the toymakers is not a quirky preoccupation with poor craftsmen and artisans. It does not require from us merely the acquisitive appreciation of the connoisseur. It demands that we look again at the myriad forms of ingenuity displayed by people in adverse circumstances, and think of ways to take this ingenuity forward. A passive acceptance of the toymaker's art will actually lead to his extinction. Even a five-minute encounter with a street toymaker can make us wonder about many things. Where did the maker find the materials to make these toys? (Did he or she have to root among the bushes like Anjali?) Can the construction or design of the toy be improved to make it more attractive or safer for children? This question especially arises in the case of sharp or pointed edges that can hurt, and colours that may harm if they are inadvertently put in the mouth. Is the toy an unacknowledged element of our tradition and heritage that needs to be documented and preserved? Is it an invention of the individual toymaker and if so, how can its design be patented and protected? It becomes obvious that street toys and their makers actually hold more challenges for us, and more choices for how we want our society to grow and develop, than is at first apparent.

Issues around the toymakers' lives are in fact central to the lives of large sections of the Indian urban poor. But the single most important factor that distinguishes toymakers from the rest is their drive for autonomy. Apart from their creativity, it seems as if toymakers would never have been what they are if they had not been extremely attached to the idea of being their own masters. In fact, even the creativity or skill involved in making the toy is something that many of these men and women acquire after it has been demonstrated to them that making and selling the toys on their own is a vocation that holds more profit and respectability than other options open to them. In thus dealing with their life problems in a spirit of initiative and the desire for self-sufficiency, toymakers militate against the passivity that has set us back in developmental terms.

The early decades of independent India saw the strengthening of the authority of the state and the vision of planned industrialisation kept before the Indian people as a realisable ideal in the near future. The government was perceived as the all-providing agency to bring everything about—social reform, political self-expression and economic progress and justice. For vast sections of the poor who had paid obeisance to princely Indian rulers as their 'mai-baap', the gleaming new Indian State, with its Five Year Plans, its provision of employment to vast numbers in public sector units, and its songs and mottos of unity in diversity meant a new, updated version of protective parent. Over sixty years later and with the coming of the globalisation-liberalisation era, this paternal vision of the Indian State may have worn thin, but the culture of dependency and despondency it bred is still very much alive amidst us.

Historian John Keay refers to this when he says, 'When he was PM, Rajiv Gandhi told me about how Indians like to leave everything to the state. Indians don't feel they have a role in improving the environment or rooting out corruption. It all has to be done by the elected representative. Indians are not keen to take on these responsibilities, they expect others to do things for them.'¹

It is only now that we are beginning to see individuals and groups growing impatient with the 'elected representatives' and their commitment to development. Whether it is the spectacular achievements of the Tarun Bharat Sangh in Rajasthan, or Aruna Roy's call for accountability in public expenditure, or individuals like a man spending his life savings to build a road to his village in Maharashtra, or a eunuch setting up a school in Patna, it is obvious that self-help is the way of the future. Repeated elections, often the only sign of India being a democracy, have convinced the most passive and resistant-to-change persons that those who wait for elected representatives to take concrete steps to solve people's problems have a long wait ahead. If you want things done

today, better do them today, is what the workings of Indian democracy seem to be trying to teach us in the present.

One category of people to whom the doctrine of self-help and self-respect will not seem exceptionally novel, is toymakers. This is because, in the narrow band of opportunities and resources that their place in society provides them, they are accustomed to making their personal way to self-respect. These are men and women who have not sat around and waited for their circumstances to be made kinder through the effort of another. They have undergone the inherent difficulties in any attempt at self-determination, and continue to make important choices.

Among the toymakers I met, one of the most distracted individuals was Kalu, from village Mata Barodi near Indore. His son, a child of two or three was sick, and had been so for a week. He had been running to doctors and hospitals and had come to see me because someone had told him that a madam had come to Indore who was being kind to khilonewallas. Every once in a while, he would break off and ask if I could do something for his child to get better. My aunt, a doctor, was with me when we spoke to Kalu, and he beseeched her to give him a slip that would help him to bypass the huge crowds of waiting patients at the Government hospital. He demonstrated creeping coloured fish, bows and arrows and swords, and jaunty party hats with gold paper and feathers stuck to them. But all the while, he was so distraught, distracted and worried, that it was a heart wrenching interview.

Before meeting Kalu, who is from the Paras community, I had met another toymaker called Ramesh, who was distantly related to him. Ramesh had decided to become a toymaker after his family had grown and his earnings as a casual labourer seemed insufficient to provide for the family. A quiet and composed individual, Ramesh's eyes twinkled when I asked him if toymakers were essentially an independent lot. 'Kya

sabhi khilonewalle azad kism ke hote hain?' were my exact words. 'Han, hote hain' (Yes, they are.), admitted Ramesh. 'Woh yeh sochte hain, tumko mera item chahiye, to aake mere se le lo. Main yahan khada hoon. Aur agar nahin chahiye, to aage chalo' (They think, if you want my toy, or item, come and buy it from me. I am standing here. And if you don't want it, please keep moving!).

This description of the toymaker's inner dialogue with potential customers was a useful indicator of how this craftsman-entrepreneur saw himself as standing on equal terms with society. When I met Kalu, I received confirmation of another facet of the toymakers' enterprise. Making toys and selling them on the streets is essentially perceived as an urban vocation today. The days when such toymakers were found only in semi-rural melas have been replaced in the last fifty years by adventurous young men, who have learnt to make toys as part of their childhood in the village and have come to cities to sell their skills. In independent India, the toymaker has asserted himself as part of the urban self-employed and not as part of the invisible, rural masses who battle disguised unemployment.

The toymaker learns to make dolls, birds and goggles of the kind sold by Samarooh in his or her village. He experiments, along with other children, with clay and wood and string and patches of cloth and leather, to make interesting objects that jump, or fly, or perform other surprising acts. But if he stays behind to make more sophisticated versions of these same objects and charges a price for them, who will buy them in the village? People will be more inclined to dissect the toy, piece by piece, and ask, 'Why should we pay so much for a stick and some paper?' As Subhash Kumar, maker of parachutes fashioned out of plastic oil funnels, rubber tubing, and polythene packets informed me in Chandigarh, 'Shaher mein to isse hum bees rupaye mein bech lete hain ji. Gaon mein isse koi poochnewala nahin hai' (I can sell this in the city even for Rs 20. In villages there are no buyers for it).

For all Kalu's distracted misery, he was also emphatic about this point. He learnt to make toys from an uncle, his 'Mama', who made a decent living selling toys, and was the inspiration for Kalu to give up the casual labour or 'baidari' he did then for Rs 50 a day. His uncle was from the same village and when I asked him why he did not start making and selling his toys at his village fair, he looked aghast at my naivete. How could I not know such a simple fact after meeting so many toymakers, his expression seemed to ask. 'Madam, yeh gaon ka dhandha nahin hai, yeh city ka dhandha hai' (Madam this is not a rural vocation, it's definitely a city one), he finally said.

People approach the city because they feel this is the place where individual enterprise will be rewarded. And indeed, in terms of opportunity to earn from self-employment, cities offer rural migrants a wealth of choices. Vegetable vending, selling plastic home use goods or belts and buckles offer the man arrived from the village different ways to earn his bread. The ones with the creative spark, the dreamers and the individuals with a strong inner 'child'—these are the ones who choose to make and sell toys.

In Indore, I also met a family of toymakers who made a selection of toys and sold these along with balloons. A bamboo pipe which fits into another and has a balloon attached to it, was one of their toys. This is blown into to inflate the balloon. When the balloon grows to a big enough size, it is left to deflate, resulting in a pretty loud sound which sounds like someone is leaning on a truck horn. The family also sold gleaming martial toys like bows and arrows and 'gadas'. I spoke to Suresh, his wife Mangubai and sister-in-law Gehnabai. They were from a Gujarati speaking community called the Malwa Samaj, and had come to Indore from Depalpur. The women were young girls of nineteen and twenty, with little infants at their hips. They had the slightly raggedy look of itinerant migrants, but said they had a 'basti' of their own kind, where people helped each other out.

Suresh was interesting for me to talk to since he represented a link with a toymaker I was trying to trace in Indore. Before I began work on this project, I had met and identified people in several locations who made unique toys, and whom I wanted to meet again for a longer conversation. Sunil Parjapat of Indore was one such person. He made flat paper figures attached to sticks, whose arms and legs moved when you pulled a string at their back. I had met him in 1997, and asked about him to every toymaker I met in Indore in 2001.

They all knew him—Ramesh, Kalu, Suresh—but no one knew where he was now. For Suresh, he was the 'ustad' or guru who teaches a novice his craft. All Suresh was able to tell me was that Parjapat had returned to Gujarat from where he had come. He might even have taken to some other work, Suresh felt, because the toys in which he specialised had exhausted their appeal. It was important to modify or improve old fashioned toys to make them more attractive for new customers, felt Suresh. Parjapat had failed to live up to one at least of the toymakers' mantras—adapt and survive.

Suresh and his wife and sister-in-law seemed prepared for every adaptation in order to survive. They deeply regretted being illiterate, and each was determined that their children should do better. Every one of them had done manual labour of some kind, and making and selling toys was a sign of their upward mobility. Suresh's elder brother had now started a tea shop. He himself showed a strong streak of that autonomous spirit I found in virtually every toymaker I spoke to.

'Doosre kaam mein ham din bhar kaam karen, phir shaam ko paisa milta hai. Isme yeh hai ki ham jab chahe dhandha kar lete hain, jab chahe baith jate hain' (In other types of work, we have to slave all day to get paid in the evening. Here in this work, we make and sell when we want, and stay home when we want). Suresh's wife Mangubai was prepared to go even further than this simple statement. For her, the attachment to toymaking came

out of pride in achievement, self-respect, and a readiness to adapt. 'Kisi ke saamne bheekh nahin mangni padti hai. Apne baal bacchon ke liye kama sakte hain. Naukri mein mahine bhar mehnat karo, aakhir mein paise milenge, usme se bhi kabhi paise nikal liye, kat diye...Apne haath mein kalakaari hai. Jis din kalakaari khatm ho jayegi, us din doosra raasta pakad lenge, mazdoori kar lenge...' (We do not have to beg from anyone. We are able to earn for ourselves and our children. In a job, you have to work all month, get paid at the end, and out of that, they may deduct something, give you less...We have the art in our hands. The day we lose this art, that day we will find something else to do, even labour if we have to...). When Mangubai talks about losing the art or skill of making toys, she does not really mean that they will forget to do what they already know. She means a time when the toys they make are no longer in demand – the fate that has befallen Sunil Parjapat. In her young, 19-year-old mind, this possibility is already there, and she is prepared to deal with it when the time comes.

Another approach to autonomy showed me how tricky the issue of 'upliftment' or 'intervention' was, when it came to toymakers. Any attempt to help them has to take into account their fiercely independent nature and their demonstrated dislike for intrusive schedules. In Agra, I encountered Ajay, son of Mukundilal, who used to be a versatile toymaker. Ajay sells balloons because it is easier. He makes the toys his father taught him to make only for certain festive occasions like Dussehra or the 'Shravan Melas'. He has a tidy sideline in rope that he twists out of jute fibre, while his father's brother, uncle Dalchand, has an equally good alternative worked out with steel almirahs that he makes in the months when toys are not so much in demand. Ajay is a savvy character who says, 'Dussehre mein khilone, diwali mein rassi. Ek dhandhe mein mandhi aati hai to doosra pakad lete hain' (We make toys in Dussehra, and jute rope in Diwali. When there is a slump in one activity, we take up the other).

Ajay has three brothers, and all of them have inherited his father's toymaking skill to different degrees. But he says it is a vocation that is fairly demanding and none of the brothers has taken it up as his only means of livelihood. When I asked him if the toymaking activity would become more sustainable if he received regular assistance in terms of material, he acknowledged that this would be a big help. But when asked further if he would like to supply regularly to a shop or outlet that guaranteed him sale of certain pieces, or teach the skill like a teacher at select schools, he demurred. 'Phir to duty ho jayegi na madam?' (Then it becomes like a job, doesn't it?), he asked me. The implication was clear. The only reason selling balloons or toys was so attractive was that it gave Ajay and his family the flexibility to practise their vocation when they felt like it, and to refrain from it when they wanted to rest. If this flexibility was snatched away, then the toymaker on the street became just like any other hapless and harried artisan churning out stuff for museums and emporiums.

The clearest articulation of a toymaker's pride in his autonomy and skill came right at the beginning of my encounters with these creators. It was expressed by Mohammed Tyab, known as Shyam Lal, who was the father of Gulab and Banarasi, the lads I have described in an earlier chapter. There was undoubtedly a touch of bravado about this statement. It came from a man who shared a tiny working space with a silk loom worker in one of Varanasi's poorest localities. One small corner of this tiny courtyard held a single roomed hut, the dwelling of Gulab and Banarasi and seven other members. Some hens scratched in the dirt nearby, and scraps of coloured paper and a pile of sticks and bamboo shavings showed where Gulab's father made his toys. Although he must have been only in his forties, he had stopped trying to sell them on the street himself, leaving it to 18-year-old Gulab and his 17-year-old brother to carry the straw covered pole on their shoulders and go to crowded market areas.

In spite of the visible difficulties that seemed to surround this man, he calmly said to me, 'Khushnaseeb hain, khat aur kamate

hain. Haath mein hunar hai. Koi cheez ka soch aur fikar nahin hai' (We are fortunate, we earn and we eat. The skill is in our hands. No other worries are troubling or bothering us). In the time I spent talking to Mohammed Tyab, I learnt that Gulab, his eldest son, had run away from home when he was eleven, and spent some years in Kanpur where he had faced really tough times working as a hotel boy. These difficulties made him return home where life was definitely not rosy, but at least one was within the circle of family affection and care. When I visited their home, Tyab's wife, Vasanta, had gone to their village near Faizabad to attend a family occasion. During the monsoon, the family retreats to this village, as the returns from urban toy selling are meager. They then take up farming in the small plots of land they possess in the village. As Tyab puts it, 'Char mahine barsaat hoti hai to char mahine ham retire. Phir uske bad khao, kamao' (When it rains for four months, I 'retire'. Then, after that, I earn and eat again).

It may seem inexplicable how Mohammed Tyab maintains such a cool, laid back attitude in the midst of such poverty. To some extent, his statements did reveal a certain bravado. For instance, he said, 'Hamare bachche kabhi taqleef mein nahin pade' (My children have never got into trouble). But later, the story of Gulab's traumatic flight from home, and his return, was revealed. And yet, every bit of Tyab's tranquility cannot be ascribed to a wish to appear better than he is. At some, subtle, indefinable level, Tyab did truly seem to me to be untouched by the deprivation that was his lot. He was obviously naturally philosophical and given more to cheerfulness than a habitual depression. He was popular—quite a few weavers and neighbours from the nearby huts came to cheer him on, many greeted him as they passed. And most importantly, his serenity seemed to be tied to a pride in his skill, the 'haath ka hunar' that he mentioned, which is such a factor even with many other toymakers I spoke to. Having the hunar seems to produce a quiet confidence among the poorest—that they will be able to provide for themselves with the most

basic of materials. Armed with this hunar and little else, they are willing to pursue a life of self-determination against formidable odds.

In fact, in terms of any outside agency assisting the toymakers, only one is ever mentioned—God. As Mohammed Tyab says, 'Madad karta hai to uparwala hai. Wahi jilata hai, wahi marta, aur wahi khilata ha' (If anyone helps, it is only God. He makes us, destroys us, and it is He who feeds us). Repeatedly, the story is about self-reliance and prayer, a combination of the two.

I met Ameena Khatoon and her son Ghulam Nabi Azad in front of the famous Indore Rajbada one July evening in 2001. This 35-year-old woman, with two grown up daughters who were married themselves, was out selling a three-horned noise maker made out of plastic oil funnels and shiny coloured paper. Her husband had been ill for a month, and although he was still making toys with Ameena's help, coming out in the evenings to roam the busy market area was too much for him. Ameena and her husband had learnt to make the toys from elderly Shaukat bhai, who still lived close to their home, and was a respected 'ustad'. He had taught several people the hunar that would take them forward.

Ameena Khatoon struck me as a composed and capable woman, with immense trust and confidence in God's generosity in providing for her and her family. 'Khas baat to yeh hai ki maine aaj tak kisi ka sahara nahin liya. Sirf Allah-Tala par bharosa karte hain, ki jisne banaya hai, woh jaroor hame dega. Woh koi kaam hamara rokta nahin ha' (The fact is that I have never depended on anyone else. We only trust in God, that He who has made us will not fail to take care of us. He does not stop us from doing anything). Ameena hailed from a town called Jawra, near Ratlam in Madhya Pradesh, but after she and her husband had taken to making toys, she had traveled to Ahmedabad, Surat, and wherever the seasonal fairs took them. About others in her community or biradari from Jawra, she said, 'Woh log nahin

banate, woh log nahin samajhte dhandhe ko. Koi bai log majdoori karti hain. Koi kapde banati hain, koi chudi bechti hain. Humko aise hi achcha lagta hai' (Those people don't make toys—they don't understand the vocation. Some of the women do casual labour, some tailoring, some sell bangles. I like this particular work).

'I like this work'. A simple assertion that says it all. With rare exceptions, toymakers on the street are not under any duress. Even the faith they exhibit in God is directly related to the place they have been able to create for themselves in the world through their skill, or *hunar*. God is perceived as trustworthy because He does not stand as an obstacle between yourself and the path urged by your heart, or aptitude, or strong liking. In the toymaker's mind, God is an enabler, provider, indulgent parent with a sense of humour. For the best of us, such a concept of God is sufficient to give us strength. In the world of the toymaker, this faith replaces everything else—the benevolence of a welfare state, the appreciation of a receptive society and help extended by competent authority. Even if the toymaker has none of these, he still has an inner source of help. He's convinced God is nudging him along.

However, just because the poorest among us are strengthened by their inner faith, it is no reason for us as a society to offer them little else.

* * *

At Elliot's Beach again, on a summer evening in Chennai, I watch the stream of walkers pass, among them a maid wheeling a baby girl in a pram. The child is sucking on a bright orange teething ring. Her grandmother walks a few paces behind the maid and the pram.

As I watch, the baby is momentarily distracted by a sight or sound, and the teething toy slips out of her hand, and rolls on the pavement. The maid walks on, she hasn't seen it, and even though

the baby is leaning out and looking back at her toy, neither has the grandmother.

There is a man selling boiled peanuts and slices of raw mango from a small wooden cart he has parked alongside the pavement. He's seen the toy, and while I warn the grandmother, he picks it up, still wet with baby's saliva.

He pours a little water on it, then picks up a square of newspaper, used to hold peanuts or mango, and wraps the toy tenderly before handing it to the waiting grandmother. She's not a customer; she just takes the carefully wrapped toy and continues walking. He turns back to his cart, unaware of my scrutiny.

It never fails to touch me, even though I've seen it a hundred times—the gratuitous kindness of those who have so little.

The Toymaking Tradition

*Kuch parivar abhi bhi bana rahe hain. Dehaton mein bhi khilone ban rahe hain. Par mehngai ke mare dhandha band ho raha hai.
(Some families are still making toys. They are also being made in the villages. But rising costs have caused the vocation to be on the brink of extinction.)*

Laxmi Nath Lakhera, retired lacquer toymaker from Rewa, Jabalpur.

*Khilone banana dimagh ka kaam hai. Yeh dhandha badal raha hai.
Naye naye log isme ghuste chale aa rahe hain.
(Making toys is a vocation that requires applying one's brain. This work is now changing. A lot of new, raw people are becoming toymakers.)*

Ajay, son of versatile toymaker Mukandilal, Agra.

So much of what I observed and was told in my encounters with toymakers from 2000 to 2002, made it seem as if selling their handmade toys on the streets was a vocation that the majority arrived at out of individual choice or inclination. But even this quirky, individual, vanishing vocation had a perceivable tradition, wherein skills were passed on from one practitioner to another. Classical texts and documents to define the art of making toys for the streets may not exist, but this art has been around from days of yore. Whether it is the product of a chance discovery or a

modification of another skill differs from person to person and toy to toy. However, a discernible thread runs through the craft, and this points both to its durability, and its vulnerability.

If there exist seasoned practitioners to pass on what they know of a particular craft to younger persons, that craft has the potential to sustain itself. But if there do not correspondingly exist younger candidates eager to learn the craft, then the craft itself is in jeopardy. I was able to see at the very beginning of my work, that toymakers generally had an 'ustad' figure from whom they learnt to make the particular 'item' that helped them to earn their bread. This was very apparent in Varanasi where I met Arun Kumar Jaiswal and Mohammed Tyab. Arun Jaiswal makes and sells fearsome looking black crocodiles or magari. These are made with newspaper that has been dyed black and accordion pleated to create a long, rippling, snake-like shape. The head is made out of cardboard and has eyes, and a row of white serrated teeth, glued on to it. A small clay pulley under the neck of this croc makes it move easily along the ground. The trick is to pull a thin string which emerges from its neck, and then leave it. The crocodile creeps the pulled length of the string by itself.

Arun had learnt to make this from a Calcutta toymaker. 'Calcutta ka ek dost tha. Woh dekhta tha ki pareshaan rehte hain. To usne pehle taiyar maal diya — magari — aur kaha 'chalo becho'. To kuch din use bechke, taiyar maal ki nakal karke, haath saaf ho gaya. Ham khud banakar bechne lage.' (I had a friend from Calcutta. He used to see me worried about making ends meet. So he gave me readymade toy crocodiles and told me to sell them. For some days I sold these, began imitating the design, till I was able to make and sell them myself.)

My next encounter with the toy crocodile of identical design came in Calcutta, during Durga Puja 2000. The maker was young Ganesh Sahu, a Bihar boy settled in Calcutta, who sold these crocs in the crowded Esplanade area known as Dharamtalla. The most interesting detail that Ganesh told me was that he had arrived as

an orphan from Bihar, and had first sold readymade paper crocs for a toymaker, who later went away to Varanasi. There seemed a definite link between Ganesh and Arun, although neither was aware of it. It was quite probably the same man who had set them both up in the trade.

When I was searching for toymakers among the hordes of handicraft, foodstuff and balloon sellers in Jaipur in October 2001, I met Dipen Das from West Bengal. He told me he would introduce me to another genuine toymaker who was also from West Bengal. It was thus I met Salim, whose family had moved to Allahabad from Calcutta in his childhood, and who had come to Jaipur to live by selling his particular toy—fearsome black paper crocodiles. The difference between the crocs made by Arun Jaiswal, Ganesh Sahu and Salim, is so marginal as to be almost unnoticeable. Salim acknowledged a definite link between all the croc makers. He recognised Arun Jaiswal's photographs from my album, as that of 'Pappu' from Benares, and his wife Salma likewise recognised Arun's wife.

With Salim I had come full circle in the story of the *kagazer kumi* (paper crocodile in Bengali). At last, I had a name, and an identifiable person who had taught Salim the craft. He was Jameel, who had last been known to live in Varanasi. Salim knew both Arun, and Ganesh. This 25-year-old confidently said to me that only about 10 or 12 people made the black paper crocodile all over India, and he knew all of them. One man, either Jameel or Jameel's ustad had set a tradition, and it had survived so long because followers like Arun and Ganesh and Salim had been available.

It was most probable that the paper croc was a classic rural toy from the days before Independence, and all an ustad had to do was to provide it a fresh context—the streets and markets of urban India. In that sense, many of the toys are really folk toys from an earlier time. It is their practitioners who have redefined their tradition.

There is a dilution of skills over time, as students are not as expert as their masters, or find that the toys their elders sold no longer have appeal in a different time. These toys are gradually given up. Ajay, son of Mukundilal does not remember most of the toys his father made, neither does Suresh, who learnt from Sunil Parjapat. Dalchand, Ajay's uncle remembers that the toys of his father's time were very rustic. They can't be replicated in today's time, he feels, unless some great changes are made in material and design. It seems as if with every succeeding generation there is a loss of repertoire. The only phenomenon that can offset this is if newer designs emerge to compensate for the toys that are lost. But this is not very apparent. Instead, toymakers are turning into balloon sellers. Colourful balloons are saleable all year around, and the machine to fill up the balloons with gas requires only a small investment. In Mumbai in 2002, this is what I found in the most densely crowded areas. Lots of balloons, and no toys.

There is another way in which an older, more established tradition impinges on the craft of toymaking. This is when an individual has been trained in a particular folk art and adapts it to make and sell toys on the urban scene. Prime examples of this were Vishnu Kathputliwala, whom I met in Pune, and Syed Basha whom I met at the Mysore Palace gate where he has set up shop under a tree.

Vishnu Kathputliwala had arrived in Pune ten years before I met him in 2001. He had come from Jodhpur, and was a trained puppeteer—one of the craftsmen churning out Rajasthan's best known symbol. Having taken a liking to Maharashtra and married a local girl, he now roams Pune city selling long beaded mobiles of stuffed birds, puppets and wooden carvings. Some of his products are a more sophisticated version of Samaroo's rustic toys. Vishnu sets great store by his tradition and the puppeteer community that helps him in times of need. Many such people have moved out of Rajasthan to find an audience for their skills, he says, and they help and support one another. For him, orders for special puppets and shows at birthday parties are of special

importance. He also participates in government sponsored handicrafts exhibitions like the winter mela at the museum.

However, even though his children help him make and sell puppets, and even though he says 'Yeh dhandha achcha lagta hai kyunki isse baal bachchon ka pet bharta hai' (I like this work because it helps to keep my children fed), when it comes to his children continuing in his footsteps, the answer is 'No'. He says he is working this hard only to see that his children do not have to be like him. 'Bachche bade hon to koi bhari dhandha karen, yehi ham sochte hain,' he says (When the kids grow up, I hope they do work which carries more weight with society).

In contrast to Vishnu, who thought his craft was not good enough for his children's future, was Syed Basha, who thought his children were not good enough to learn his craft. Basha was a former snake charmer. He moved around with his father and grandfather as a child, with coiled cobras in the circular basket, and the typical snake charmer's pipe made out of dried wild gourd. When the returns from this profession began to dwindle and the difficulties inherent in it became more acute, Basha gave up keeping snakes and began instead to make and sell the charmer's pipe. He also developed a side line in flutes and the one-stringed toy violin. What made Basha's violin different from others I had seen was that it was made out of coconut shells and a piece of stretched skin, instead of the usual small terracotta cup and brown paper. In addition, Basha's violin bow was made from jute fibres, similar to the ones that Ajay wound into rope in Agra.

Basha was an immensely colourful character whom I have described at length in a later chapter. He decried the lack of passion and intensity in today's youth that made them unlikely to become successful self-employed craftsmen. He remembered his own youth as a time of devilry as well as dedication, when he had to painstakingly learn the ancestral vocation of snake charming. His own sons showed none of these qualities, he

regretted. 'Ham log thoda deewana rehta tha. Ab ka bachcha khali tip top hai. Kha lene ka, pi lene ka, yeh samaan banane ka baat unko aata nahin, seekha nahin.' (We used to be a little crazy. Today's youngsters are merely 'tip-top'. They just know how to eat and drink. All this making things is beyond them, they never learnt how.)

The older the toymakers, the more likely they were to point to a decline in the craft itself. The youths who had just entered the profession were more likely to be optimistic, happy that they had found a way to earn a living. At Nampally, in Hyderabad, I met Mohammed Husain, who was, at age 76 in 2000, the oldest toymaker I had met. Husain's family had been making lacquer covered wooden toys since the 1930s. He had learnt the craft as an apprentice to his father, but he had himself made an important contribution to it.

Forty years ago, he went to an industrial exhibition in the city where one of the stalls was selling a lathe. They were also giving out brochures. Mohammed Husain took one of these home after seeing a detailed demonstration of the lathe. Then he set out to build one for himself. He succeeded in assembling a power-driven lathe that is in use till today for making wooden toys, wickets for cricket, bangle and kumkum boxes, bed posts, and weights for weight-lifting beginners. Not only did Husain have amazing success with the machine he had created, he was also able to assemble it for many others at a cost of Rs 10,000. Many of those for whom he built the machine and to whom he taught his special skills have subsequently left to go abroad to Saudi Arabia and other places in the Gulf. Husain himself has two sons in the Army, both posted out of Hyderabad, and one son in Sharjah. None has taken up his particular vocation.

He told his sons he could manage to look after himself and his wife, as long as he could still make it to work and his lathe. 'Tumse hamko mangna nahin hai', he said. 'Mangna hai to uparwale se, ya grahak se. Grahak maal leke paise dega, uparwala faryad

sunke.' (I don't want to ask you for anything. If there is anyone I have to ask, it is God, or the customer. The customer will give me money in exchange for goods, and God will provide in answer to prayer.) In his youth, small clusters of wooden kitchen toys were sold at melas, and his lathe was always churning them out. When he noticed a decline in the demand for these, he switched to the other sports and household equipment instead. The instinct of adaptation, such a hallmark of the true modern artist/craftsman, is very well-developed in him.

Mohammed Husain's craft itself is not in immediate danger. As a maker of traditional toys, he made many toys similar to those made in Channapatna, or villages in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Such toys have been classified as handicrafts and have received assistance and recognition as a cottage industry. At least, governments occasionally think of them. But the sheer inventiveness, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the courage that Mohammed Husain displays will unfortunately go with him.

At one time, through the efforts of a kind ITI official, Husain was allotted a loan of Rs 96,000 for developing his wooden lathe unit. But the Field Officer in charge of the loan harassed him. 'Why do you need so much money?' he was repeatedly asked. Vexed and frustrated after some weeks of this, he refused the loan. From the story, it is obvious that a sizeable cut must have been demanded by the Field Officer/middleman. Husain does not regret refusing the loan. With the controlled smile of one who is truly confident, he says, 'Ham koi majboor thode na hain. Uparwale ki daya hai.' (After all, I'm not helpless, at anyone's mercy. God is kind.)

I met another elderly lacquer toymaker, this time from Rewa, Madhya Pradesh. He belonged to a traditional community of lacquer craftsmen, as his name, Laxmi Nath Lakhera implies. Sixty-eight-year-old Lakhera remembered the heady days of plenty of melas where he sold lacquer tops, balls, ducks and animal toys, railway engine and motor shapes. Lakhera attributed the decline of lacquer toys to a decrease in their demand. He

waxed eloquent about the qualities of 'lac', which was made after peepul, kosa and other trees were attacked by insects, and a resinous residue resulted. This resin was cleaned, and chemical dyes were added to it to make six or eight beautiful colours. These sticks of coloured lacquer were applied on the wood directly on the lathe itself. I saw a live demonstration of this from Mohammed Husain.

Laxmi Nath Lakhera met me in Jabalpur where he had come to attend a family function. He had a limp and was retired from work. His wife, too, is an invalid. No social security or employees' insurance is available to them, and life is hard. A meager existence has to be eked out on their children's handouts. Lakhera was clear about several factors that have led to a decline in his craft, other than the lack of demand. There is also a shortage of 'dudhia' wood, a gradual fading away of the older, more expert techniques as craftsmen die without their skills being completely absorbed by their successors, and the rising cost of all the materials in making toys.

His response to his current predicament has been to turn philosophical. In fact, he is close to acquiring a 'Baba' like status among his neighbours and acquaintances in Rewa. Only the outer accoutrements are missing. He says that 'chandan lagana, mala pehenna' (daubing yourself with sandal paste, and wearing holy beads) is not for him.

There is a great deal required to be done if the tradition of individual toymakers selling their wares on city streets is to be sustained at all. A recognition of the skills of these craftsmen is essential, as is sufficient custom for their toys. The materials that go into toymaking have to be made available at rates that toymakers can afford, or supplied to them to produce finished goods. A chain linking the creative craftsman to his target audience of children has to be established. And behind all these initiatives must lie a firm belief in the creativity and enterprise of individuals.

Even while this is being read, some toys from long ago are being snatched away from our children, and their makers are getting pushed into other marginal occupations. There is a definite list of 'endangered' people and occupations in our midst.

* * *

I am sitting in an auto near a dargah at Nampally in Hyderabad, waiting to meet Azmat Khan, a toymaker who has just stepped out of his house. Two handsome young men, dressed in the latest style, come sauntering past. They stop a little way away, have a whispered conversation, then come close to the auto and peer in at me.

'Aap idhar kaye ke liye khade hain?' (Why are you waiting here?) they ask me, in an unmistakably Hyderabadī intonation.

I explain that I am writing a book, and am waiting to meet Azmat Khan.

'Kitaab?' (Book?) they ask, their accent making it sound like the Urdu for 'medal'. I nod and say yes.

A small retreat, and another whispered conversation between them. Then they return, and ask, 'Kya kitaab likhenge? Dictionary?' (What book will you write? A dictionary?)

They are young, and good looking; and their ignorance is appalling. They probably know all the latest Bollywood hits, but little else.

What education do our people receive? And where does it take them?

Things That Rattle, Things That Jump

Yeh naya daur chala hai. Ab purane item khilonon ko log nahin pasand karte. Naya kya nikla hai? Woh dikhao.

(This is the age of the new and novel. People don't appreciate the older toys any more. 'What's the latest toy? Show us that.)

Mohammed Rehmat, toy parachute maker from Bihar, to author in Bhubaneswar.

Iski sundarta aur saste hone ke karan bikne mein time nahin lagta. Halanki banane mein time lagta hai.

(Because this toy is beautiful and priced low, it doesn't take any time at all to sell, although it takes a lot of time to make.)

Toymaker Salim describing his black paper crocodile to author, Jaipur.

The most difficult task of my entire project with toys and toymakers was in trying to preserve, transport and maintain fragile and ephemeral objects. I experimented with different kinds of packaging. I grew accustomed to courier company officials scratching their heads and looking baffled when they saw the unwieldy shapes of my parcels. Most of all, I never returned from a journey without being festooned with long golden swords, or gleaming windmills, dolls made out of pith, or trumpets made out of ordinary white card. On my last trip to Gujarat, I even had occasion to distribute some of the toys I had bought in

Ahmedabad to coolies, urchin water peddlers, and a couple of Railway officials at Vadodara station. The toys invariably produced their own adventures.

The need for these toys to be collected, archived and stored, their history and that of their makers documented, stayed with me as a persistent thought throughout the length of the project. But what was the point of such storage, if no one could touch and play with the toy again, and see the wonders it performed? What use would things that jumped, rattled, whirred or blew powerful blasts be behind glass, on shelves growing dusty? The need instead was to have a place where a daily audience, particularly children, got a chance to have a hands-on experience of the toys, and where the stock of such toys could be regularly replenished by their makers.

As conditions for makers of these toys get more and more difficult, many of them begin supplementing their income with other work, like Dalchand and Ajay of Agra, who have taken to making steel cupboards and jute rope respectively. This means that gradually even the energy and inventiveness available to the toymaking occupation by its practitioners gets diluted over time. Besides, not enough toymakers are being attracted to the trade even in the case of the more traditional toys. There is a crisis situation prevailing in the whole area of handcrafted toys that goes beyond the mere collection and preserving of single objects. What is at stake is not just that certain toys will not be seen again, but that a whole way of thinking, many forms of ingenuity and expertise, are under threat and may disappear if not recognised and supported.

Many existing toys are the result of a high level of innovative thinking. If lost, these designs and ideas will take generations to be redeveloped...One way of injecting new life into the folk toy craft could be by introducing dynamic toys straight into the classroom as teaching aids. Such toys could form part of craft courses, assist children to learn about materials, as well as the

importance of measurement and precision in mechanical devices. Toys demonstrating the principles of mass and gravity, friction, sound, centrifugal force and simple mechanics could even replace some of the expensive scientific equipment. Introducing these toys into the classroom would not only encourage talented artisans to develop new ideas and improve existing designs. This would help evolve a new role for folk toy designers and makers.¹ Sudarshan Khanna, engineer and designer, and person behind important initiatives in toy documentation and design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, suggests this role for toys and their makers in his book *Dynamic Folk Toys*.

This brings up the question: what has happened to crafts courses in our schools today? How many schools affiliated to government boards of education, actually do away with handwork and crafts courses and instead replace them with computer studies? Why is engineering considered an education for mainly abstract thinking in today's times, and computer-aided design the solution to everything? The menacing, insidious role played by globalisation and the restructuring of the world according to the new age of information has something to do with this. In addition, in a society where there has always existed a perception of abstract thinking being higher on the social scale than work done with one's hands, removing opportunities for hands-on experience in schools is even more destructive. Even while our children learn about the glory of India and the value of Indian handicrafts, they are taught to spare little thought for the craftsmen.

While many educators and scholars have recently been up in arms at the distortion of history in Indian textbooks, few take time off to analyse the precise manner in which our children are seeing our indigenous culture in a devalued manner and growing up to think that only the gleaming models of Western enterprise and technology are worth emulating.

None have raised the issue of disappearing handwork and Socially Useful and Productive Work periods in schools. The

reason our children are so seduced by the machinations of capitalism, especially its mass produced games and toys, is because India itself is presented to them in anachronistic terms. We tend to counter Western progress with images of our culture and heritage that are a few centuries old. We hark back to Aryabhatta, or Chanakya, when we should really be introducing them to people in their own neighbourhood, who are first generation entrepreneurs, or inventors, or businessmen. It remains for BBC to have a programme series called *Business Bizarre* profiling the success stories of Haldiram or Amul. Bizarre or not, these businesses have much to say about the Indian way of doing things, and it is important our children should know about this perspective.

My cousin in the Army has a deliberately rustic way of responding to sights of great sophistication in the city. Whenever he encounters one such, he gives a corresponding example from Jabalpur, where both of us were born, and which used to stand for a backward, hick town some years ago. So you take him to a city store, with acres of stock on display, accessed by a gleaming escalator, and he says, 'Yeh hamare Jabalpur mein bhi hai (the escalator). Ise ham seedi kehte hain.' (We have this in Jabalpur too (escalator). We call it the stairs.)

I laugh at his jokes, and I truly appreciate the impulse behind them. He is very much like a child who is being shown a heap of gleaming toys another child has got and is standing unimpressed, saying, 'So what?'

Economic recolonisation of third world countries is a distressing fact of life for us in the post-World War II world. Many countries in Africa and Latin America have faced unmitigated disaster in the past decades after their independence struggles resulted in their newly freed states trying to do business with former rulers and their allies, as equals. The protectionism and planned industrialisation of the first few decades of independent India saved us from the worst effects of the unbridled march of capital

across the globe. Up till the 1980s, poverty was declining, as it should in a developing country. With the opening up of the economy and the direct investment being allowed in our country by major international players, this trend has actually been reversed. In the 1990s, the 'economic growth' and 'success story' of the Indian economy, lauded by the likes of Madeline Albright, U S Secretary of State (1997-2001) in an address to the Asia Society, have 'bypassed hundreds of millions of Indians. They have been left behind in India's own cesspool of poverty. Not only that, millions more have sunk into poverty in the last decade.'²

These are the results of findings of the National Sample Surveys and the Reserve Bank of India, and seem to bear out the following prophecy of Edward Goldsmith, leading figure of the environmental movement who visited India a week before Bill Clinton's visit in 2000, and said in an interview to Pritish Nandy, '...how do you think farmers with less than two or three acres of land will survive...? They will not. They will be pushed into the slums, every one of them. And when your farming community goes, so will the small shopkeepers, street vendors, service castes. They will all go because they depend on the farming community. So you will marginalise and make destitute some 600 to 700 million people...Can you imagine the impact of making 700 million people destitute? No one has ever done this in the history of the world! That will be the inevitable consequence of globalising your country. It will destroy India.'³

Not every one of us can take on the might of the capitalist forces of the world, or the formidable cultural invasion unleashed by the US through the mass media. However, we can strengthen the 'So what?' impulse within ourselves and in our children. We can draw on the examples of strength, resilience, courage and intelligence in our own midst, rather than imagining that these praise worthy qualities only ever belong to someone else. The daily wage earners, the toymakers and the comfort workers in the cities who toil to provide us what we need, represent these qualities in abundance. It is time we began looking below us for

what is to be most admired in men and women, rather than search in vain for these qualities among our rulers.

If we go about with a feeling of being inferior to others on the world stage, it is because we have forgotten how to say 'So what?' with any degree of conviction. And such feelings of inferiority produce their own reality, as Swami Vivekananda had pointed out. In the race to be global, we must not forget the struggling, but vulnerable, local. In looking closely at the toymakers, and the joyful objects they create, we may rediscover some of the things that still seem very dear, some things that we don't want any power on earth to destroy.

The only fair I attended which was replete with toys and toymakers and evoked the melas of long ago was at the Khandagiri caves in Bhubaneswar in February 2002. It was here that rural toymakers from places up to 100 km away, such as Jazpur, or the all-India itinerant variety, from Bihar and Bengal, had come to sell toys. The colour and scope of this fair was wonderful. Apart from toys, many local crafts and household goods from local materials were on sale. These included wooden painted mini Sri Jagannath of Puri temples, hand fans of coloured palm leaf woven in bright checks, horse and animal figures made with coir, and terracotta pots and vessels for homes. The prices were such as to wound you—they were so little for so much effort.

I bought a wooden roll along toy here that had been made by a carpenter from Jazpur, who made toys as a seasonal occupation. This had a long wooden handle and a bird perched on a wheel. As the wheel moved, the bird moved up and down. The toy had been coloured in the green, pink, and yellow of most folk toys, and was a valuable find for me. It was being sold for Rs 6.

Toys have been classified by Sudarshan Khanna in different ways in his books *Dynamic Folk Toys* and *The Joy of Making Indian Toys*. He has essentially concentrated on the scientific principles on which the toys, such as friction toys, spinning toys, gravitational toys and so on work. Or he has grouped the toys according to

their complexity and materials enabling children to replicate them. The toys which have been described with diagrams and instructions in *The Joy of Making Indian Toys* are not all made by toymakers. Some are the toys that children experiment and play with when they have time on their hands and recyclable materials available all around. For upper middle class children, such fertile conditions have become almost extinct. Gone are the days when my brother would fashion a piggy bank for me by making a long slit in a jam jar tin top, sealing the lid with melted lac. My children did not exhibit any marked desire for fashioning their own playthings. However, styrofoam has provided one particular nephew with endless opportunities to make airplanes.

My own classification of toys is looser; I group toys according to the wonders they perform, their appearance, and their relationship with their makers. Accordingly, my first category is the generic 'mela' toys that are seen in some form or the other, all over India.

Among these generic toys, the most universally found is the paper fan or windmill. I have seen this toy made by Mohammed Tyab with long paper blades or with small, glittering petal like blades made of shiny 'polyester' paper as made by Rajaram of Trichy or Nagalingam of Chennai. I have also found it framed in round wire frames as made by Dipen Das of Jaipur, Suresh of Hyderabad or Babu of Bangalore. There is also an interesting variation of this toy—a large windmill has a smaller one attached to it in front. The arrangement of the blades on the frames is done in such a way as to make the larger fan move in a clockwise direction and the smaller fan move anti-clockwise.

After the windmill, the 'tik-tiki' or rattle is the most commonly found toy. This comes attached to a stick on which it revolves. A turbine-like arrangement at the point on which the flat drum of the rattle rotates on its stick, is made of anything from film negatives to cardboard. The flat drum is similarly made out of paper or red polythene stretched over a small round frame. In

Indore, small tin boxes of shoe polish are used to make the drum, a nail is the small drumming stick, and a rubber band and cardboard create the turbine.

Among the generic toys are two types of snake. One is the accordion pleated paper creation discussed at such length in Chapter 9, which becomes a fish, a snake, or an alligator depending on the kind of face and tail attachments. This toy creeps along very convincingly and causes much amusement among children whenever I do live demonstrations of it, as does the 'striking snake' which is made by fixing sticks together in crosses by using ordinary stationery pins. All the sticks fold harmlessly in your hand, and a small snake face attached to the last cross of sticks is the only sign of the toy. But when the sticks are opened by holding the last pair with both hands, the 'snake' moves forward a great length causing everyone present to say, 'Aaah!'

Then there are the frog rattles that work on friction. I have already described the sliced lemon shape of Anjali's rattles. The best specimens I have ever seen were made by Iran Ali Mulla from a village near Calcutta. These have been described as 'humming drums' by Sudarshan Khanna. Iran Ali Mulla's particular toys were tiny, a small piece of hard plastic pipe with a little brown paper stretched over one end, thin nylon string going through a hole in the paper and attached to a small stick on which the toy rotates. The resultant whirring sound makes you feel as if a monsoon flooded paddy field full of frogs is in your vicinity.

There are a whole set of martial toys inspired by the mythological serials on TV. These include bows, arrows, swords, 'gadas' and fearsome looking 'trishuls'. I found these martial toys being made by the gypsy community of toymakers from Gulbarga, migrants from Rajasthan and UP, local toymakers in Chandigarh, and Indore (where they are also made by Rajasthani arrivals). Azmat Khan of Hyderabad was a lone individual maker of these toys. His swords are more durable because they have wooden spines.

He also has a nice side line in party caps because they are covered with the same glittering paper or 'parni' that he goes to buy all the way from Mumbai every three months.

There are toys that require open space or a large terrace to make them such as the spinning stick that Hari Singh shoots a great distance into the sky in front of India Gate in Delhi, or the parachutes made by Subhash Kumar and sold at the Chandigarh lake, and similar parachutes made by Mohammed Rehmat whom I met selling them at the Khandagiri fair. The parachute has a plastic oil funnel into which a cut has been made. The funnel is attached to a long stick. A small plastic doll, rolled inside a small polythene carry bag, which is attached to the doll with strings, nestles inside the oil funnel cup. A length of rubber tubing helps to launch the contraption high into the air, from where the doll comes daintily sailing down, with its plastic parachute. Selling these toys on the street demands not only the skill of making them, but also sufficient mastery at demonstrating them.

The one-stringed violin is available freely in North India, and some families have carried this to the South, like Tamanna's family. A variation of this toy, using coconut shell and animal skin instead of terracotta and brown paper, was demonstrated to me by snake-charmer turned toymaker Syed Basha. Trumpets are other noisemakers that are found with many variations. Asif and Mohammed Khan of Hyderabad make a twin trumpet with the recycled white card of old company brochures. The sound is truly terrific.

Flutes made out of bamboo are sold in every Indian city by young boys, some very small. The flutes protrude from a tall pole similar to the ones carried by toymakers. All the boys come from Siwan or Darbhanga district of Bihar where whole villages are engaged in making the flutes.

Human and animal figure toys are found at different places. Iran Ali Mulla makes a wonderful 'jigging puppet' toy with jointed limbs which moves with great abandon on a single stick. A bird,

which used to be made from pith, but is now made of Styrofoam or thermacol, leaping up and returning to its perch is made by Sridhar, Abraham and a few others of Chennai, and sold every year at the Kapaleeswar temple fair.

Kaleidoscopes are made in different shapes, using broken bangle bits inside to create the designs. In Ahmedabad, the kaleidoscopes are slightly conical, using the cardboard spools on which yarn is spun in mills. In Kanyakumari, they are square shaped.

In 1979, I used to see a man standing in the seething crowds near Dadar station at Mumbai, close to Chhabildas Hall. He would unfold a magical toy made out of cigarette pack sides, bits of bandage to make hinges, and coloured tissue paper. Making only a slight sound by pursing his mouth to draw the attention of passers by, he would hold up this marvel. When one side unfolded, nothing was seen. When he turned over the top panel and began unfolding the other side, small coloured paper flowers were revealed between the cardboard panels. I encountered only one man making a more durable, thick cardboard version of this toy that he calls 'magic'. That is Mahender Kumar from Turkman Gate, Delhi. He is the only toymaker I met to have a printed visiting card reading 'Craft and Mela Toys', and he is also quite aware of the worth of what he crafts. His father was a street toy seller who went abroad in the 'Festival of India' days, and this gave the family the boost to achieve some much needed upward mobility. Mahender Kumar sells at craft exhibitions, including those at Dilli Haat and Pragati Maidan. He teaches children how to make some of the toys in school craft classes. But he was also the only toymaker to have let me down. The money that was sent to him for a sizable consignment of 'magic' folding toys, did not bring me anything.

Among toys were some 'one-off wonders' like the piercing, bird sound, PVC whistle. This whistle, made with a small length of PVC pipe, a plastic cap, a wire to act as a plunger, makes a very loud and real imitation of bird sounds. It is the discovery of one

K K Samy of Madurai, who taught about ten or twelve people how to make it in Madurai and Trichy. I saw it in the shop of Shanmugham, who makes and sells it in Tanjavur, outside the art gallery, where he has a flute shop. Later, I found a plastic replication of this toy in Chandigarh.

Plastic replication of toys is inevitable once the toys are on the streets. While the patenting culture and design registration are still far from developed in India, it becomes necessary to think about this in terms of protecting the poorest and most vulnerable creators. For instance, patent and copyright laws are usually enforced by the rich and powerful, whose brand names, logos or designs have been copied without their agreement. Nike and Reebok have the means to prosecute hundreds of manufacturers of T-shirts and caps and shoes in our country and in other parts of the world, who use their name to sell inferior goods. But when a toymaker finds that the toy he was selling to customers for Rs 5, has been replicated in plastic and is available for Rs 3, what are the avenues of redress available to him?

In fact, brightly coloured plastic imitations of many of the older toys are made by small factories in Mumbai and Delhi. A whole selection of these imitations is sometimes sold in plastic bags. I have seen a small selection at Tirupati and a much wider range being sold at Pune station. Any indignation I felt on behalf of the toymakers could not be directed at the sellers. At Tirupati, they were as poor and marginalised as the makers of the original toys. At Pune station, they were sightless vendors. There seems to be an association of the blind that has set up these toy sellers in this vocation. The plastic toys are violating some rights and buttressing others. In a setting where poverty has only minor variations in shade and depth, it is hard to find villains. The villains live and profit elsewhere.

The real danger is not that some small scale plastics manufacturer will drive the toymaker out of business. The real danger is that some day some of these toys will become patented in the same

way as Basmati rice and Neem leaves have been sought to be appropriated. And an international toy company will peddle a glossier, far more expensive version of the toy to us.

Some toys do very well in a regional setting where they are the local specialty. Foremost among these are toy folding umbrellas made of printed, and coloured cloth. These are widely sold in Mysore (particularly at Brindavan Gardens) and Bangalore, and some practitioners have taken them elsewhere, like Alexander in Chennai. In Indore, the three-horned plastic blowpipe is made by many toymakers. At several cities, there is already a toymaking tradition of wooden or folk toys. This is visible in Varanasi, where wooden rattles and 'charak' birds are popular classic toys. The birds are arranged in a circle around a feeding table, which may be round or hexagonal. Strings attached to each bird are tied to a weight under the flat table. When this weight moves, it pulls a bird along with it, so that all the birds put their beaks down to peck something off the table in turn, as the weight moves in a circle. Some specimens of this toy find their way to emporiums and shops.

In Pandharpur, there are beautifully balanced wooden toy carts with horses. Lacquer covered toys of the kind Laxmi Nath Lakhera and Mohammed Husain spoke about are still available in many venues, particularly temple towns like Tirupati, Madurai and other places, where a selection of wooden lacquer covered kitchen vessels is sold in a basket made of palm leaf. Pune has a delightful range of miniature brass kitchen vessels, and Chennai sees a profusion of them in steel, aluminium and plastic, including refrigerators, mixer grinders and other modern gadgets.

The toys I collected accompanied me to many places. Whenever they were presented to children, there was a virtual scramble to touch and handle the toys, and much delight arose from the wonders they performed. I am always lifted by the spontaneous reactions of people to the toys. What saddens me is the fact that people have to see them in such special circumstances. We live in

a world that is becoming so threatening to their makers that much travel and expense had to be borne to unearth these symbols of our ingenuity.

* * *

One of the happiest individuals I have seen in recent times was a crier in an open vegetable market at Tiruvanmiyur, Chennai. This curly haired young man, dressed only in a printed lungi folded up to his knees, had a thin film of dust covering his whole body, his hair and even his eyelashes. He had a singularly happy smile, and he yelled 'Pandi aal vaeli irukku pa! Bajji vazhakai irukku pa!'

I never did find out why the sweet potatoes he was hawking were called 'pandi aal vaeli'. But the rest of his sentence meant 'Green bananas available to make 'bhajias'.

He sat casually on the edge of the rough wooden platform of the vegetable shop, made out of old crates, and kept up this cry. When one stopped to buy either of the two advertised vegetables, he would beam more happily than ever. I bought them only to have him smile at me. But picking up and weighing and putting the vegetables in my bag was not his job. That was done by the owner of the shop, a boy called Periasamy.

'Periasamy, give this nice madam some vazhakai', instructed the happy crier. And Periasamy, quiet and serious, did as he was told.

The crier was a coolie in the market, and this was a moonlighting assignment—in the blazing summer sun. Although I asked for him several times after that day, I never saw him again.

This part time coolie-cum-crier has no idea of the immense power of the global forces working to push him and others like him into ever more devastating poverty. But I do. And it makes me want to hold our people close and do everything in my power to make the world a better place for them.

Whom do the poorest Indians have, except their own countrymen?

Etched In Memory

*Agar Madam mujhe Madras aane ko kahen to main unke saath
Madras chala jaaonga, aur wahan kaam karoonga.
(If Madam asks me to come to Madras, I will go to Madras with her,
and start working there.)*

Sitaram Raghuvanshi, toymaker, to Mohr Singh, rickshawman,
in Agra.

*Yeh to samajhiye jahiliyat ka pehchan hai. Ilm jahan hoga wahan yeh
sab baat nahin uthega. Log samajh jayenge ki yeh do sharer hai,
magar kaat ke dekha to ek hi khoon hai.
(This is nothing but philistinism and savagery. Where there are
knowledge and wisdom, such issues won't arise. People will
understand that these may be two bodies, but cut them open and you
will see the same human blood.)*

Mohammed Rehmat to author in Bhubaneswar, in the context
of ongoing Hindu-Muslim tensions.

Over fifty toymakers spoke to me and shared the concerns of
their chosen vocation. Each one contributed in some way to the
big picture of struggling craftsman-entrepreneurs in an urban
setting. This chapter pays tribute to the most unforgettable
individuals among them.

Sitaram Raghuvanshi emerged in my life like the answer to a
prayer. It was my second day at Agra and I had just left the guest

house in Mohr Singh's rickshaw. Both of us knew that the morning
hours were not really a likely time for toymakers to be spotted.
But we were cruising on hope.

Minutes later, in a crowded market street, we saw the bobbing,
colourful, windmill-festooned tall pole of a toymaker
approaching us. Delighted with such a fortunate find, I spent a
few minutes, right there on the roadside in front of some shuttered
shops, talking to Sitaram. An interested crowd gathered around
us, and some of these people, notably a man with a missing leg
and a crutch, began exhibiting some small degree of resentment
that they were not being similarly sought out.

I recognised the signs that our interview would have to be
continued at another time and place, and we parted with a
promise to meet that evening at Namner, where the Janmashtami
fair was being held.

When Mohr Singh and I reached the green fields of Namner, close
to the Cantonment area, in the evening, Sitaram was already
standing at a suitable sales spot. I had the opportunity of seeing
him surrounded by a crowd of children all holding out coins
and asking for a toy. Sitaram was clearly confused by the intricate
calculations required by so many transactions—the correct change
to be collected or returned. He scratched his head, his pronounced
squint growing even deeper with worry every now and then. In
spite of this, he would pat the head of a child who was just heading
away, triumphantly clutching a windmill, or a pair of goggles, or
a turbine rattle.

At the Namner fair, I also saw many carts full of breakable,
painted clay toys, which were priced between Re 1 and Rs 5 a
piece. These toys had remained virtually unchanged from the
days when Premchand wrote about Hamid and his friends going
to the Id fair in the early years of the 20th century in his story
Idgah. In the story, one of Hamid's friends buys a clay soldier
which breaks after a few hours of play. In August 2000, there
were plenty of clay soldiers available, as well as policemen,

batsmen and bowlers, village women and wrestlers. All these clay toys were sun baked and brittle which is why they were priced so cheaply. Their makers looked very poor indeed—as fragile as their products. But they were still part of a community, recognised as toymakers, and stayed close to each other in a shared settlement at Namner, which provided them some security.

Sitaram, on the other hand, was a descendant of a single individual who had made toys out of sheer love for children and because he was good with his hands. He had been a guard at the Agra Fort and had passed on his love for children to his son who wasn't much good at school, but was quite good at picking up the technique of making paper kites and windmills. When Sitaram finally got the opportunity to talk to me at length when I visited his home, he spoke about his most important characteristic as having a premi swabhav or loving nature.

'Itne log kehte hain tera prem itna hai, to tu padha likha hota to koi kaam aisa nahin hai jo tujhse na hota. Hamare liye to jahan jao wahan 'Ram Ram', jahan jao wahan 'Salam', he said, describing the response his affectionate nature evoked in others. (A lot of people tell me, you have so much love, if you had been educated, no task would have been beyond you. Wherever I go, I am greeted with a 'Ram Ram' or a 'Salam'.) His expansive, all-inclusive character had even fired Sitaram with the desire to do public service. Apparently, he once approached the local MLA to inform him that he would be doing his own kind of service in the community, and volunteers of the MLA's political party should not interfere or stop him. 'To woh kehne lage, ki tumhe kaun rok sakta hai? Tumhara naam hai Sitaram aur tumse prem karne wale log beshumaar hain. Tumhara bada dil hai.' (So he said, who can stop you? Your name is Sitaram and a great number of people hold you in much affection. You have a big heart.)

Sitaram's words brought home to me another very important quality of the toymakers I met. The appreciation and applause of others was very important for them. For some of them, in fact, it

had a value greater than everything else—money, prestige, comfort. One individual who truly brought this out was Lakshman, a seller of tiny, bird sound whistles made by putting together two flat pieces of bamboo and blowing into them. He has covered the sides of this with shiny paper and was selling them strung on the toymaker's pole. He called them 'pipayya' whistles.

When I encountered Lakshman, with longish curly grey locks of hair, a grey safari suit, and a straggly beard, wandering in the Sarafa area of Indore, he was coaxing the most beautiful tunes out of his pipayya. One particularly piercing one was the coyly sung popular song of North India, 'Kabhi Ram banke, Kabhi Shyam banke, chale aana, babuji chale aana'.

I expressed appreciation at his playing and his instrument, marvelling at how entire songs could emerge so powerfully out of such a tiny whistle. His eyes filled up at this open admiration; he told me he had been making and selling these toys for many years, and his specialty was the ability to perform while simultaneously playing the pipaiyya, the dholak and the ghungroo. When asked his name, he replied, 'What is Ram's brother's name? 'Lakshman,' I said and he nodded and added that his name was Lakshman Kanve, and he had been doing his pipaiyya routine for forty years.

We made an appointment for him to come and see me, and he signed off with a flourish, playing *Achcha to hum chalte hain* for me as he went ('OK, see you later', goes the song). As we drove out of the area, I spotted him again, walking along in a daze because of the compliments he had just received. He shuffled along on bare feet, and his eyes were focused on some inner world, so that he did not see my wave or hear me call about our next meeting.

But, like Samarooh, Lakshman was to prove elusive and difficult to find again. It seemed as if the few words of encouragement and admiration, and the few rupees for his

whistles that I had given him, were the sum of what I would be able to do for him.

In Calcutta, I met Tushar Ball, who sold jute masks painted like many exotic furry animals, on the pavement at Dharamtalla. The masks were a discovery of his father he said, but he had added some flourishes to them to add variety. In fact, the influence of the new wildlife programmes on satellite channels was undeniable, when one gazed upon the masks. They brought distinct memories of animals I had seen peering from the branches of tropical forests on Discovery, or National Geographic. From Tushar I received the distinct impression that he regarded his whole endeavour as art. This was borne out also by the fact that he dabbled in wooden sculpture. Tushar was not enthused by the experience of having a government sponsored stall sell his masks at sundry exhibitions. Payment was often slow in coming, taking three or four months, and overheads had to be added, like packing and transporting of his stock. Instead, what he valued was the admiration and appreciation of passersby in the crowded Dharamtalla area, including foreigners who exclaimed over his masks. Here he could charge from Rs 15 to Rs 150 for a mask — ‘whatever comes to my lips’ is how he phrased it.

Calcutta was also where I met Iran Ali Mulla, the ace experimenter and versatile genius, who sold his toys to wholesalers in Canning Street and looked after his whole extended family of 14 members at his village in North 24 Parganas district. What made Iran Ali unique was that his vocation had grown from playing with toys to observing their structure and experimenting painstakingly with materials, despite repeated failures, till the finished product was achieved. Thus the village urchin knew how to make flutes from snail shells, the properties of black mud and red, and such other secrets. ‘Amar guru kenu nai,’ declared Iran Ali. ‘Niji seekhe che’. (I don’t have a guru. I teach it to myself.) The composure and self-confidence of this fourth standard graduate was truly memorable.

Syed Basha of Mysore who had given up snake charming and taken instead to making one stringed violins out of coconut shells, was another unforgettable character. I asked him something I often asked other toymakers: What did he fear or worry about in his work or life? He told me he prayed to God in the morning and left for work. What possible thing was there left to fear after that? ‘Saamne kutta aane se, billi aane se—kya bhi hone do—hamko dar nahin lagta hai. Hamare dil mein waisa baat hi nahin hai.’ (If a cat or a dog crosses my path—whatever does—I am not going to become worried. I just don’t have thoughts like that in my mind.) With one sweep, Basha had dismissed superstition that has so many Indians in its daily grip. He was obviously a man of courage and resourcefulness.

A corn on his index finger is the result of his constantly rubbing jute string over it to make the violin bows. He told me he’d had it removed twice, but it came back because of the work, so he had decided to leave it as it was. Regretting the present times, when he felt that ‘paise ki barkat nahin hai’ (money was losing its value), Basha remembered a blissful period before he got married and acquired responsibilities. He would have Re 1 in his pocket, and a whole crowd of friends would collect around him to cadge a meal. Now the same meal could cost even a hundred rupees, he said.

He had bought a TV set for his family but they fought so much over which programme to watch, that he threw a rock at it and it broke. He refused to buy a new one after that. He had looked inside the broken TV and said, ‘Khali andar do wire hai.’ (There are only two wires inside). Why should he pay several thousands of rupees to buy a box that had only two wires inside, demanded Basha? The old broken box fetched him only Rs 6 as raddi (scrap). Money has no value today, said Basha. But it is still possible to get appreciation, he concluded.

The most depressed and worried toymaker I met in the entire two-year travel of my project was Arun Kumar Jaiswal of

Chetganj, Varanasi. Arun Kumar's gloom stemmed from the fact that his parents and family had set up a small plastics factory manufacturing toys and some household items, and they had taken care to exclude him from the whole set up. His mother had enough money to lend it out on interest, but would not give him any financial help. He had driven a rickshaw for a while to shame his parents into understanding his condition, but had failed to move their stony hearts.

It was hard to draw out this individual, who declared, 'Hamara koi sunne wala hi nahin hai. Kisi ko ham kya sunayen?' (There is no one to listen to me. What shall I say?) In vain did I point out that you always needed to keep your spirits up—why, two or three years ago, I would never have dreamed that the opportunity to meet all these toymakers would come my way, but it had come, hadn't it? My question drew only feeble replies from him. He seemed too overwhelmed by the raw deal served to him by his family.

But I persisted. I drew his wife aside and spoke to his daughters. I praised his son Sandeep whom we had met the previous evening selling toy crocodiles in Godowlia and who had led us to his father. Gradually, Arun Kumar unbent. He admitted finally that what he possessed was indeed a valuable skill. 'Yeh haath ka hunar hai. Sab kuch koi cheen lega, to bhi isko nahin cheen sakte hain. Kahin bhi rahen, apna dal-roti to kama sakte hain'. (This is the skill of one's hands. Whatever anyone snatches away, they cannot take away this. Wherever I live, at least I can earn enough for my daily bread.)

I remember all these individual toymakers because I saw a little of myself in each one. I can identify with Sitaram's loving nature and with Lakshman's need for appreciation. I can feel Tushar's artistic pride and have experienced the value of Iran Ali's self-instruction. I hope my courage is enough to counter superstition, like Syed Basha's courage undoubtedly is, and Arun Kumar shows me a familiar obstacle at many moments in life's journey—the luxury of depression.

But the one toymaker with whom I identified in a very vital and direct way is someone I call 'The Patriot' in my mind. I met him at the Khandagiri fair in Bhubaneswar, on 21st and 22nd February 2002, days before the Godhra train incident and its aftermath ripped apart many notions of our being a peace loving, tolerant nation.

Mohammed Rehmat had arrived in Orissa from his home town in Dahiaganj, Bihar. He told me he was 26 years old and had faced a lot of problems after his father had died. He was married and needed to support a family. He had studied up to Matriculation, but failed in one paper. When he reappeared, the results were declared void because the question paper had leaked out. So he stopped studying in frustration.

After he started making the toy parachutes that he was selling when I met him, Rehmat had travelled to Kolhapur, Hubli, Bangalore and Mysore in Karnataka, Calicut, Salem and Erode further South, and Patna and Tatanagar in his home State. He had also sold bags for a while, and knew how to say 'Rs 10' in many different Indian languages, since that was the price of the parachutes.

Rehmat said that he could have told me that he was from somewhere else, not Bihar—everyone knows what the popular impression of Bihar is. But what was the use? How can you deny the place that your motherland has in your life? When I asked him to sing, he sang,

*Hind desh ka pyara jhanda
Ooncha sada rahega...
Kesariya bal bharne wala
Sada rang sachai
Hara rang hai hari hamari
Dharti ki angdai
Aur kehta hai chakra hamara, kadam kabhi na rukega.*

As he sang this patriotic song describing the colours of the Indian flag, similar to the songs I had learnt at school, goosepimples

rippled along my arms. The whole experience of a young Muslim boy from Bihar, singing proudly about a country where fundamentalist forces were trying to turn a whole population into minority-baiters, produced a sensation that was unique. I wished others could have heard this impromptu concert next to the ticketing booth of the Khandagiri caves, in the darkness of a February evening.

If we are to believe the propagandists of the Sangh Parivar, who use the word 'secularist' as a term of abuse, Muslim households all over the country are sheltering enemies of the nation, the ISI has armed thousands of young Muslims with grenades and rocket launchers, and the only education most Muslim children receive is at 'madarsas'. Here was a lad from a 'backward' State, who was a product of the same government education I had received, with its built-in patriotism and cultural conditioning. Rehmat said, 'Ham jante hain ki Pakistan hai, wahan mere qaum ke log rehte hain. Magar ham to yahin paida hua hai, yahin ka hai. Agar jaroorat pade to Hindustan ke liye ham lad bhi sakte hain.' (I know that there is a Pakistan where people of my religion live. But I was born here, and I belong here. If necessary, I can even fight for my country.)

Neither of us knew then, that the fight we would soon be called upon to fight was not against any external enemy, but against the people in power, who, like the British, were determined to 'Divide and Rule'.

The India we dream of will not be handed to us without struggle and effort.

* * *

A popular 'chaat' shop in Chennai is named after a Hindu holy spot. The young, gentle owner knows me as a regular and we occasionally converse.

One day he remarked on my longish absence and I explained that I had been away to Agra, Mathura and Brindavan. Knowing

that his family must have come South from the North, and making polite conversation, I said to him, 'Braj bhoomi bahut sundar lagi. Brindavan sundar sthan hai.' (The Braj countryside was beautiful. Brindavan is a beautiful place.)

He smiled and said, 'Vaise to Hindustan ka koi aisa sthan hi nahin hai, jo sundar na ho'. (Really speaking, there is not a single place in India that is not beautiful.)

He had not meant it as a rebuke, but I was struck.

Can the feeling for one's country be confined to a few choice 'punyabhoomis' or holy spots?

Can God be said to inhabit only one spot in all India, when in fact He has marked it all as His own?

Proceeding With Caution

Despite all these hereditary skills and individual vitality, the traditional toymaker can no longer compete against the factory-made toys, even when they are shoddily made out of recycled plastic using moulds and the most garish colours. Quite apart from the novelty value that these toys have and the fact that they can be cheap, the hereditary craftsman and woman is being edged out because of the non-availability of raw materials.¹

Geeta Doctor, *Tales Toys Tell*, Crafts Council of India.

After 40 years of planned development, planners are still conceptually confused about the role of the artisanal sector in India. From an analysis of successive Plan documents, it is evident that there has been no consistency in defining, or even stating, objectives for the sector...Given the force of national and global economic trends, it is time to rethink the role of the artisanal sector in the Indian economy, and put it on the national agenda...For, craft skills built up over the centuries are an important national resource that cannot be jettisoned as dead weight.²

Kanika Satyanand and Shekhar Singh in *India's Artisans: A Status Report*, 1995.

Channapatna town lies between Bangalore and Mysore and the emporia selling lacquered wooden toys are visible even if one is just driving through the main road. Stop at any of these, and

salesmen surround you to point out the best toys—monkeys and birds, shiny balls that look like the gleaming ones used in billiards or snooker, dolls used to learn counting with many wooden layers arranged on a central stick, and other such objects. Ask to meet the makers of these goods, and a guarded look becomes immediately visible on the salesperson's or shop owner's face. 'Why would you want to meet these people?' 'Aren't the toys right there in front of you?' 'What can you possibly want to know from them?' 'They're scattered all over the place. They're busy in their homes.'

When I encountered all these reactions and excuses in Channapatna, the experience was illuminating in itself. For the first time, I met the marketing structure-middlemen-government officials who stood between the artisan-craftsman and the outside world. In any other place, whenever I had wished to meet a toymaker, I had scoured the streets till I found one. Here I had to offer explanations to a dozen people before they would vaguely point me in the direction of some toymakers' houses. Even then, they said these men would be busy, or not interested in talking.

I was in Channapatna nearing the end of my travels for this project. I was curious to see how government intervention in the midst of a traditional toymaking community had actually worked out on the ground. The other less exalted reason for being here was that every time I mentioned in any gathering that I was writing a book on toymakers, there would invariably be a voice that exclaimed, 'Channapatna!' This was said in varying degrees of smug satisfaction, ranging from a Eureka! type reaction to a languid and bored 'Tell me another' type of tone. If a hundred people thought I should know all about Channapatna for my book, then it was clearly necessary to come here.

There is a government estate in Channapatna where sheds have been put up housing baby lathes. These lathes are similar to the one I had seen Mohammed Husain work on. Craftsmen who register at the Channapatna government estate are given a space

to work and have to pay Rs 75 a month towards electricity. The toys they make are also bought by the government for their emporia, but there is no guarantee that they will sell their entire stock. Some craftsmen are skilled enough to produce plenty of toys over a monthly period, and some produce less. The 'hale' or 'dudhia' wood from which the toys are made is becoming hard to come by, but the government estate gets a certain quantity. Two hundred and fifty four houses have been constructed for toymaking artisans in the town, and a Design Centre under the Government of India, is available with suggestions to improve or modify toys, should the craftsmen wish to avail these services.

Most of the toys produced in Channapatna are, however, a continuation of traditional designs. The handles of skipping ropes, the layered figures for counting and learning colours, the giant wheel with tiny doll figures, and the monkey with movable limbs are designs which have lasted the memory of two or three generations. There is no visible race to make newer, more complex or innovative toys. No pressure is being felt to abandon old items for new. Perhaps that is why, in this new era or 'naya daur', the annual production of toys from the government estate is worth a mere Rs 20 lakh, all of which get sold.

What is probably flourishing more than the toy industry is the business of exporting wood and lacquer household items like coasters, curtain clasps, magazine stands, and a steadily growing range of Vaastu and Feng Shui artifacts like wooden pyramids, Mandarin ducks or doves, hexagonal mirrors and other such paraphernalia. The traditional glossy finish lacquer has been replaced on these products with paints of different kinds, poster colours and other emulsion paints. Although lac is still used as a medium for the colours, there is a profusion of new designs requiring each piece to be individually painted. Thus, the old lacquer toymaker's limited palette of six or eight colours has opened up to many new tints. But all this is happening more in private units set up by entrepreneurs, rather than on a more widespread scale as a trend among the craftsmen themselves.

This whole export-oriented creation of wood and lacquer artifacts from Channapatna is mostly done by entrepreneurs who obtain orders from overseas clients and execute the orders through local craftsmen. When I visited the unit of a local entrepreneur, he was full of the complaints of any factory owner who is handling labour, with one important difference. Here he was not talking about mere workers, but craftsmen who had acquired a traditional skill, and had worked in a very different work environment in the past. What bothered the entrepreneur the most was that craftsmen did not respect the demanding deadlines that export related work brought with it. They moved more in tune with their own requirements and needs, which the entrepreneur translated as whims and fancy.

According to him, the craftsmen always worked with great diligence only when their financial need called for it. When they needed money desperately for a wedding or a child's education or an illness, they rushed to borrow from their owner/boss, and then they worked very conscientiously. Unfortunately, these periods did not always coincide with the entrepreneur's own need. At times when he needed them to work night and day to complete something, but their own financial position was comparatively secure, they would turn up for work according to mood. This uncertainty was obviously giving him ulcers, but he was surrounded by beautiful things created by skilled hands, and it seemed it was the price he would have to pay. Once this 'haath ka hunar' was wiped out, there would be nothing to distinguish the craftsman from the card punching, target meeting worker in any factory.

To me, Channapatna represented several facets of the whole process of intervention in the lives of craftsmen. Action that seeks to improve the lot of independent toymakers has to be more sensitive to the spirit of such individuals and their need to work according to a schedule and setting of their choice. Apart from this, when we set ourselves up as guardians, marketers, mentors and guides of the toymakers, we would do well to have Gandhiji's

talisman firmly embedded in our minds. What will be the impact of any action we take on the poorest person we know? The face of such a person in front of our eyes will lend perspective to our decisions, and prevent us from being deluded by seductive dreams of conquering huge world vistas for the toymakers.

For traditional toymakers such as those in Channapatna, shortage of raw material or wood is a most pressing concern. But there is a great divergence in the statement of its availability from the government estate and private entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs say that possession of this wood has become illegal, it is highly difficult to obtain, and unless this difficulty is removed how can the government be sincere about giving a fillip to the craft or the trade and export of Channapatna artifacts? According to the administrators of the government estate, enough wood is made available to the craftsmen who register with them.

The toys routinely produced at Channapatna either lie at the local emporia or make their way to similar emporia elsewhere. There is no vigorous direct marketing at work. Several co-operative societies have been formed to protect the interests of the craftsmen but, according to one of the men working in the government estate, the better-off among the craftsmen have succeeded in garnering most of the benefits here too. Middlemen are an accepted fact of life—here even the private entrepreneur with his export orders acts like a middleman. His strength is his access to the overseas demand which is beyond the reach of the craftsman. He uses this to set the terms under which the craftsman will work. After months spent listening to the ‘apni marji se’ (out of my personal choice) and ‘haath ka hunar’ (skill of one’s hands) exponents, this was a strange new world to me.

Addressing some of the most pressing needs of urban toymakers may, in reality, be a simpler task than solving the complex issues that surround the gradual decline of craftsmen and artisans in India as a whole. There is first and foremost a need for such people to be recognised as craftsmen whose skills and products should

be preserved. This is a prerequisite for any initiative from government or government aided organisations. But there are other key areas in which the initiatives of small groups, even individuals, can bring about a change in the way toys are made and received in our cities.

For an urban toymaker, usually the most important issue is working capital. His materials are usually available in plenty, since he is often using recycled, cheaply available local materials. But the need to have sufficient money to prepare stock in advance, especially before festivals and melas is acute. If a toymaker has only Rs 1,500 to invest in fresh stock, how can his returns be more than Rs 3,000? If the same man invests Rs 5,000 and cashes in on a big local fair, he can earn a five-figure sum. Micro credit of sums ranging from a few hundreds to five or seven thousand should be extended to these people wherever possible, provided some accountability is established.

Being able to penetrate those sections of the city market where he normally lacks a foothold is also a crying need for the toymaker. Windmill sellers usually welcome orders for large scale buying of their coloured fans for school sports days. Balloons are also in demand on such occasions. But in addition to this, school carnivals or fetes should be considered incomplete if a local toymaker has not been invited to set up his small shop there. This could be easily achieved by Parent-Teacher associations in many upmarket city schools.

Unorthodox display and sales points for such toys can be canvassed for, and used to market the toys, provided the middleman exploitative mentality does not creep in here too. An umbrella stand type of bucket is all that is needed to set up a small display in the corner of a bookshop, neighbourhood grocery store, cards and music shop, or clothes boutique, to mention just a few of the shops seen in my own locality. The market has to be gradually expanded with cooperation from the toymakers too. They have to be persuaded to abandon some of the older city

areas that are crowded and congested, and move around more in residential areas, hawking and calling in the old way, or positioning themselves at strategic points.

Visits to local fairs, especially the well known annual ones, should be encouraged as a school activity, and must also become a 'fun' family outing that brings children face to face with the creators who crave their custom.

Design help is a crucial need for toymakers from the viewpoint of making their toys safer for children, removing sharp edges, rusted or protruding parts. Design is also needed to help make transport easier and more manageable for the toymaker. What alternative can be designed for the tall, straw-covered pole? How can the toymaker who has to use public trains or buses best carry his wares? Can special containers or even low-cost vehicles be designed for this? With so much emphasis on design in the present, surely it should not be impossible for young designers to apply their minds to these needs? In future, designs for toys should include a thought for the maker, so that a product is deemed desirable when it addresses both, the audience for the toy, and the person who produces it.

Documentation of the toys and their makers is important, but sometimes this can also work against the interests of the craftsmen. If every toy was dissected, its structure laid bare and explained to thousands across the country, its existence as an object of wonder, as the product of an individual, would be seriously threatened. Toymakers are very careful about transferring their skill to another. They will do this willingly if the person seeking to learn is from slightly further afield, not if he or she is a neighbour who can set up shop on the same stretch of street. Documenting the toys will have to take this into account. Some documentation may also open the door to global interests acquiring the wherewithal to start providing serious competition for the street toymaker. If toymakers today are much worse off than their predecessors twenty years ago, it is because the dice

has become increasingly loaded against them. In particular, the global effect of rising prices is robbing many of their ability to make do. We have to be very careful about not loading this dice further.

One of the things I found most heartening when I visited Ahmedabad in April 2002 was that several toymakers from toymaking families near Kankaria had gone to Jodhpur to sell the stock they were finding difficult to sell in riot-torn Gujarat. The innate push to survive is very evident in the poorest and most vulnerable people. But they are also the worst affected by social and political instability. Strengthening the toymaker can hardly be a matter of tinkering with the disparate elements of his life—materials, market, design and so on. The poor toymaker will finally only be strengthened if we develop a respect in our society for all manner of urban survivors. We do no good to the toymakers' cause by being silent spectators to repressive practices that threaten the rights of other poor and marginalised communities.

For democracy has to mean more to us than the routine exercise of our vote at regular and frequent intervals. The actual filtering of power and decision making to the people is what we must have a desire to see. Practicing democracy as mere elections has led to our creating the 'elected representative' monsters we see in our midst today. Bloody revolution is not the only way of challenging such people, although at times, it may seem the most tempting! The slow dawning of democratic wisdom is also a powerful factor where it occurs. We are as powerless or powerful as we feel we are. If this were not true, then thug-like contractors could not have been repulsed by village women in the Himalayan foothills, or by whole village populations in the Aravalli area of Rajasthan.

The truth is, if India still retains a quality of life that is enviable on the global stage, if we are different from the East Asian Tigers and Capito-Communist China, and still far removed from the

uneasy societies of the West, a lot has to do with the fact that our people have retained their best qualities. This phenomenon is under attack. Today if an Indian wants to have any pride in country or countrymen, he or she has to counter beauty pageants and growing communalism, the economic recolonisation practiced by international market forces and the corrupt doublespeak practiced by elected representatives. This countering has to take place as much in one's mind, as in the outside world through the individuals and groups one chooses to associate with. It is not a job for the faint-hearted. Perhaps that is why it's best if we diehard Indians practise it. After all, crossing the road, or driving a car, or walking the length of a railway station are hazardous occupations we are accustomed to! Life is lived on such a visceral level in our country, that it is sufficient preparation for the arduous tasks before us.

Helping the toymaker will therefore mean that each of us lives a fuller life. Amen.

* * *

The man at the take-away restaurant in my neighbourhood was busy. Impatient to order my dinner time parathas, I still had to stand aside courteously while he counted Rs 15,000 in fifty and hundred rupee notes from a wad that a friend/customer/associate was handing to him.

There he stood, on the pavement in full view of hundreds of people, counting the stuff that can turn a man against his own mother. When he was done, he turned to go into his kitchen kingdom, and attend to my paratha order, along with several others.

All the while I waited, I thanked the circumstances which have landed me in a corner of the world that still seems safe and predictable, still some years away from violent crime.

As the going gets tougher for the poor, displaced, and unskilled, and the images and icons of the rich get bigger, better, glossier, how far away will robbery and murder be?

About Tomorrow

*Yeh sadiyon se bekhwab sehmi si galiyan
yeh masli hui adkhili zard kaliyan
yeh bikti hui khokhli rangraliyan...
Jinhe naaz hai Hind par woh kahan hain?¹
(These diffident lanes, for centuries without dreams
these crushed red buds, only partly bloomed
these hollow festivities up for sale...
where are the people who are proud of India?)*

Sahir Ludhianvi in *Pyaasa*

*Dhoop hi dhoop hai halaat ke sehraon mein
Khwab aankhon mein liye log kidhar jayenge?²
(Only harsh sunlight reigns in the deserts of circumstance
where will the people with dreams in their eyes go to?)*

Iffat 'Zarri' in a Mushaira on Doordarshan

If toymakers had been a source of light for me during the period of my project, it was not entirely due to their own personalities. A large part of the luminescence was shed by their children, those bright and beautiful beings for whom their parents dreamed, with different degrees of success. The first child I met was Arun Kumar Jaiswal's son Sandeep, who was then 12 years old. Although I encountered Sandeep in a crowded market area, selling the paper crocodiles his father made, his parents denied the next day that

he'd had any hand in the actual making of the toys. They said he was mostly playing with his friends nearby, a luxury that his older and younger sisters did not seem to share.

When I spoke to Sandeep in more detail, he revealed that he dreamt of going and seeing the big cities—Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi. Although he played so much in the outdoors, he was not a cricket fan. His favourite games were 'daudanta' and 'chupa chupi' (running races, catching, and hide and seek). Even though his father was severely depressed when I met him, Sandeep himself was the picture of shy, curious, happy childhood. It was clear that reality had not begun to bite him the way it did his parents.

In Indore, Ameena Khatoon's son gave the sweetest reply of all when I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. 'Bade hoke achche banna hai. Achcha insaan banna hai,' he said. (When I grow up I want to be good, a good human being.) Ghulam Nabi was being very responsible when I met him. He was demonstrating the three-horned trumpet outside the Rajbada, enticing customers and helping his mother sell a basket full of them. This had been necessitated by his father's illness. He was not always called upon to do this selling, and told me about his parents working at home, 'Jab yeh khilone banate hain, to main baahar khelta rehta hoon.' (When they are making toys at home, I am usually playing outside. His parents were not above buying him toys of his own to play with—as the youngest son after several older sisters, he was their precious offspring. What he liked the most were clockwork toys, the 'chabi ki motor' (clockwork cars) he said.

At Azmat Khan's house in Hyderabad, the eldest son Imran, all of eleven or twelve years old, had already begun working in a local factory where they made electrical switchboards. Azmat's wife, Asha, said their daughters, born after Imran, were a little slow in studies and were progressing with difficulty at school.

Suresh, also living in Hyderabad, had two daughters, Sharada and Jyoti, who were interested in studying and were doing well at school. But getting driven out of their house in the city had cost them their education.

When I visited Suresh, his wife, Chandrakala, and their family, it was in a hut constructed along with many others amidst the rocks on a sloping hillside. This area was behind the Apollo Hospitals and close to the Film City. The family had moved here only a few months ago, when they had been evicted by legal orders passed in a case relating to repossession of the land on which they had built their one-roomed house. The sun beat down on the rocks, and the single fan was not sufficient to give any relief from the heat radiating from the stone. But in this one room, the family lunch was simmering on the stove, Suresh and his elder son Rakesh were making round framed windmills, and his daughters were showing me the notebooks of a school that had become suddenly too far to go to.

Every toymaker I spoke to hoped that his children would lead a better life than his. People like Kripal Saini who toured all over with his fairground comrades, and Mohammed Rehmat, whose wife lived with his mother and four-year-old son in a village in Bihar, yearned for a day when they could abandon the itinerant life for time spent with their families. Whatever yesterday had been like, everyone hoped that one day in the future they would achieve the stability they craved. That their children would obviously play a large part in helping them create this stability, was a view commonly shared.

But while the toymakers are trying their best to give an untroubled childhood to their children, it is the rare family that can survive the odds imposed by poverty and illness, and live together in older years, with parents and offspring under the same roof. Dalchand of Agra was one of the few toymakers who had a grown son accompanying him in both toymaking and cupboard fabrication. He also had grown up daughters who were married.

I met him in August, and his daughters were visiting him for Raksha Bandhan. Early in life, he had decided that he would not move out of Agra to sell, however tough life became for him. This decision seemed to have given him and his family visible stability.

In fact, from the biographies that many of the toymakers related, it was clear that the trauma of a parent's death was more likely to be the departure point for a push towards an independent vocation rather than an education, training, or other more orthodox reasons. Shaikh Baba roamed the streets with his father who was a fruitseller. After his father's illness and subsequent death, he struggled to find something suited to himself that would make ends meet. Finally deciding on selling balloons, he is now established in the trade. Mohammed Rehmat was enjoying life as a student till his marriage and his father's death in quick succession, left him struggling to find a foothold in the world. He scoured the forests for sticks and sat and peeled them, attaching the plastic funnels and experimenting with the parachute toy till he could make it well enough to sell.

Subhash Kumar, who also makes parachutes and sells them in Chandigarh, is from Meerut, like Kripal Saini. Both men, far removed from each other, told me individually that the best time of their lives were the days they had spent with their parents, as children. While Arun Jaiswal may have quarrelled with his parents, he still remembered his childhood—the years spent with his naana-naani (grandparents)—as the best years of his life. Childhood seems to have a sepia toned halo around it in the memories of toymakers for whom adulthood has usually meant an endless struggle to stay afloat.

Recreational spaces in cities are the meeting points for children and toymakers. It is at the beach, park, or lake that our children are likely to encounter the man or woman selling brightly coloured objects of wonder. These spaces are not only necessary for a city in a very ecological sense—as green lungs or havens for clean, unpolluted air—but they are also vital for providing

continuity to the whole culture of ephemeral handmade toys in an urban setting.

In recent times, the trend of building amusement parks over a huge expanse of land has swept our cities. Chennai itself has four or five of these amusement parks, apart from bowling alleys, video games arcades, go-karting tracks and all the other recreation industry offerings. The weekly family outing which consisted of a picnic at the zoo or a drive to a beach nearby has gradually changed to a trip to one of these recreation industry behemoths, armed with the requisite wad of notes.

All these places undoubtedly amuse, as they promise. But the point is, at what cost, and even, at whose cost? The acquisition of large tracts of land from small holding owners at villages located at the outskirts of cities is a big feature of these amusement parks. The technology they install is expensive, and therefore the tickets have to be highly priced. More frighteningly, the small print on the back of one of these amusement park tickets disowning all responsibility on the part of the park owners in cases of injuries sustained on any of the rides, can be a deterrent in itself.

All resources going into such private entrepreneurial amusement are effectively being denied to a much larger public that needs access to open spaces. But the creation of these parks has gone completely unchallenged, the debate which should have taken place at different levels of society about their relative merits and demerits, the opportunities they provide, and the ones they take away, is conspicuous by its absence. It is this indifference towards issues of public property and rights that marks much of the development we see taking place around us. We assume that 'the government' should regulate such matters, not bothering to remember that a government will hardly feel pushed to do anything about issues that its citizens seem able to take in their stride.

If toymakers are to be taken off the list of endangered humans in our midst, many other issues may have to be addressed alongside.

The preservation of public recreational spaces ranks high among such related issues. The irony is, powerful residents' associations in better off areas find it much easier to mobilise forces to pressurise city municipal corporations to remove hawkers, merry-go-round operators and balloon sellers from beaches and parks, than to get amusement parks closed down for violating land ownership or safety regulations. Or perhaps, more truthfully, they don't want to either.

What the future holds for the toymakers and their children is uncertain. How our unfolding social and political history will treat the people who dare to dream even in the midst of deprivation is as unclear as our own personal history, and no friendly neighbourhood astrologer is available to soothe us with platitudes. Only one thing is abundantly clear. It is our personal engagement with issues of the larger good that will ultimately bring the reality we dream about.

* * *

Chowk, Varanasi, has a famous lassi shop, adorned by portraits of Krishna, where the lassi is full bodied and sweet, with a sprinkling of sliced pistachios on top. It is served in tall terracotta cups called kulhads, and it seemed the ideal refreshment for our small crowd.

Our crowd was made up of Arun Kumar Jaiswal and his son Sandeep, Gulab and his brother Banarasi, our photographer, the ever-attendant 'pandas' Anil and Rajkumar Pande, and myself. There were, in addition, a couple of rickshawmen and some children who had found it irresistible to tag along behind Sandeep and the rest of us.

The lassi was served, with an inch thick topping of foamy cream, and each of us drank deep. I lingered over the dregs of my kulhad, preferring to savour the sight of a milky moustache that had formed on the upper lip of Gulab. It was a very precious moment, containing as it did all my longing that the lives of the meek should be thus sweet and replete.

This book is over. I don't know how much I will be able to do to fulfil this longing. What I do know is that memories of moments like the one above will help me pass other more difficult ones moments when it seems like there is just too much evil and selfishness in the world, and that the powerful forces ranged against the poor, the unarmed and the dispossessed are winning every battle.

At such times, I will think of Gulab, and Mohammed Rehmat, and Dipen Das. Most of all, I will think of moments I spent in the light.

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